

NICK LOWE'S TOP TEN SFF FILMS FROM THE LAST 25 YEARS

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

25TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR

ISSUE 210

INTERZONE

HARLAN ELLISON

ABIDING WITH STURGEON:
MISTRAL IN THE BIJOU

STEPHEN BAXTER
on his TIME'S TAPESTRY series

STEPH SWAINSTON
this is THE MODERN WORLD

plus GEOFF RYMAN on MUNDANE SF
JOHN CLUTE on BOOKS & much more

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INTERZONE GOES MUNDANE!

A year from now the May-June issue of *Interzone* will be devoted to Mundane SF. Guest edited by Geoff Ryman with Julian Todd and Trent Walters, it will feature approximately 35,000 words of Mundane SF.

What makes a story Mundane? A few simple rules:

- no FTL travel or communications
- no aliens
- no time travel
- no parallel universes
- no immortality or telepathy

We believe that these SF 'inventions' are powerful myths whose presence may be drowning out some very important ideas. They may be entertaining to write and read about, but could there be something else we are all missing? The time comes when someone has to throw these babies out of the bathwater and see if there is life besides.

No matter how strong your convictions are regarding the inevitability of one, or all, of the above so-far non-existent phenomena, you can still write Mundane SF if you set your story between now and when the first of these becomes possible within your own personal belief system.

Just because we don't want to see any of these usual elements doesn't mean we don't demand the highest standards of quality and sense of wonder expected from all good SF. We promise, however, that if your story so much as hints at the existence of any one of these banned memes it will not be accepted no matter how good it is. A great Mundane story will most likely focus on the future here on Earth. It can be near or far future. But any story that does not violate established facts or simply throw out experimentally supported theory can be Mundane. To see in more detail about what makes a story Mundane, visit mundane-sf.blogspot.com.

If you are struggling for ideas in the absence of spaceships, alternative realities, brain downloads, etc, try checking out some of the shocking developments that have been happening here on this Earth, according to the best scientists.

Stories are likely to be 2,500 to 5,000 words. You can submit by using the forms at freesteele.co.uk/cgi-bin/mundane.py.

Submissions must be in by 31st October 2007. **Geoff Ryman**



LANGFORD EVADES THE ATTENTION OF ASLAN

STOP PRESS!

At the UK Easter convention in Chester, the BSFA Awards went to Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *End of the World Blues* (novel), Ian McDonald's 'The Djinn's Wife' (short; *Asimov's*) and Fangorn's *Angelbot* (artwork; cover of *Time Pieces* ed. Ian Whates). The 2009 Eastercon will be in, or anyway near, Bradford: www.LX2009.com.

Springtime for Lucifer. The *New York Times* story about plans to film *Paradise Lost* is full of tasty quotations from producer Vincent Newman. "It's a 400-some-odd-page poem written in Old English," he said, laughing. "How do you find the movie in that?" But "if you get past the Milton of it all, and think about the greatest war that's ever been fought,

the story itself is pretty compelling.' Let's focus on essentials: 'less Adam and Eve and more about what's happening with the archangels', since 'In Eden there's the nudity problem...which would be a big problem for a big studio movie.' As Vincent sums it up: 'This could be like *The Lord of the Rings*, or bigger.'

2007 HUGO SHORTLIST

Contenders for Best Novel: Michael Flynn, *Eifelheim*; Naomi Novik, *His Majesty's Dragon* aka *Temeraire*; Charles Stross, *Glasshouse*; Vernor Vinge, *Rainbows End*; Peter Watts, *Blindsight*.

Further items of British interest...

Novella: Ian McDonald, 'The Djinn's Wife' (*Asimov's*); Geoff Ryman, 'Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter' (*F&SF*).

Short: Neil Gaiman, 'How to Talk to Girls at Parties' (*Fragile Things*).

Dramatic, Short: three nominations covering four episodes of *Doctor Who*.

Semiprozine: *Ansible*, *Interzone*.

Fanzine: *Banana Wings*, *Plokta*.

Fan Writer: oh God not Langford again.

Fan Artist: Sue Mason.

AS OTHERS SEE DOCTOR WHO

Christian Manz, special effects supervisor of *Primeval*, explains how its time-travelling dinosaurs and giant spiders differ from the opposition: 'Dr Who is a fantasy show where they go to other planets. *Primeval* is based on science – what species might actually evolve and take over the planet.'

Michael Crichton and *State of Fear* weren't named in Al Gore's March statement before a US House committee, but the metaphor for global warming contains a hint: 'The planet has a fever. If your baby has a fever, you go to the doctor [...] if your doctor tells you you need to intervene here, you don't say "Well, I read a science fiction novel that tells me it's not a problem."'

Best Film News Headline, reporting an encounter overlooked by historians: REVIVED NINJA TURTLES DEFEAT SPARTANS AT THERMOPYLAE.

Neal Stephenson on how we see us: 'Lack of critical respect means nothing to sci-fi's creators and fans. They made peace with

their own dorkiness long ago. Oh, there was momentary discomfort around the time of William Shatner's 1987 *Saturday Night Live* sketch, in which he exhorted Trekkies to "get a life." But this had been fully resolved by 2000, when sci-fi fans voted to give the Hugo Award for best movie to *Galaxy Quest*, a film that revolves around making fun of sci-fi fans.' (*New York Times*)

MORE AWARDS

Tiptree: Shelley Jackson, *Half Life*;

Catherynne M. Valente, *The Orphan's Tales: In the Night Garden*.

Broadcasting Press Guild: drama series, *Life on Mars*; multichannel, *Hogfather*.

Bram Stoker novel award: Stephen King, *Lisey's Story*.

NBCC for biography: Julie Phillips, *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*.

Arthur C. Clarke appeared on the BBC website in his favourite T-shirt: 'I invented the satellite and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.'

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Sound Effects Dept. 'The Archivist tugged a handkerchief from her sleeve and blew her nose, noisily and at length. Moon could hear the snot rattling through her system like an old boiler filled with air.' (Jonathan Barnes, *The Somnambulist*, 2007)

Flatulent Simile Dept. 'The sound of water grew louder, and the gusting of the wind was like the eerie farting of a giant animal.' (G.P. Taylor, *The Curse of Salamander Street*, 2006)

Dept of Wicked Winks and Unclad Fish. 'Her breasts winked at him, and he chastised himself as he felt a stir of arousal. [...] He was sixty centimeters taller, but she wiggled like a lithe, naked eel until a final shrewd twist toppled him from the bed.' (David Weber, *Empire from the Ashes*, 1993)

Eyeballs in the Sky Dept. 'His eyes ran, literally, across the whole of the upper portion of his face...' (Richard Marsh, *The Beetle*, 1897)

Well I Never! Dept. 'With summer, evening was very long – it lasted until twilight.' (Anne McCaffrey & Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, *Changelings*, 2005)

R.I.P.

George Collyn (Colin Pilkington, 1937–2002), whose ten short sf stories appeared 1964–1967 in *New Worlds* and (once) *F&SF*, died on 21 April 2002. This went unreported in sf circles, since for professional reasons he kept his real name dark and was often assumed to be a pseudonym of Michael Moorcock.

Leigh Eddings (1937–2007), US author who co-wrote many popular fantasy novels with her husband David Eddings, died on 28 February following several strokes. She was 69.

Charles Einstein (1926–2007), US author best known in sf for *The Day New York Went Dry* (1964), died on 7 March aged 80.

Charles L. Fontenay (1917–2007), US author of dozens of magazine stories and three sf novels published 1954–1964, and of twenty more books after his 1987 retirement, died on 27 January; he was 89.

Freddie Francis (1917–2007), UK director and cinematographer who directed *Dr Terror's House of Horrors* (1964), *Dracula Has Risen From the Grave* (1968) and other Hammer and Amicus horror films, died on 17 March; he was 89.

Lee Hoffman (1932–2007), US author and long-time fan who was a major figure of 1950s 'Sixth Fandom', died on 6 February. She was 74. Her *Science Fiction Five-Yearly* maintained its schedule from a 1951 launch – with publishing help from friends in later years – to issue #12 in 2006. It is a 2007 Hugo nominee.

David I. Masson (1915–2007), UK author and rare-books librarian whose seven 1960s sf stories all appeared in *New Worlds* and were collected as *The Catraps of Time* (1968), died on 25 February at age 91. His debut fiction 'Traveller's Rest' (1965) was a major highlight of that *New Worlds* era. Michael Moorcock writes: 'I liked him from the beginning. [...] I suppose it was inevitable he wouldn't have written much, given the quality of the little he did write, but it's a shame he never tried for a novel.'

Herman Stein (1915–2007), US composer who scored over 200 films including *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *It Came from Outer Space*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *This Island Earth* and *Tarantula*, died on 15 March aged 91.

Paul Walker (1921–2007), US author and critic whose interviews were collected as *Speaking of Science Fiction* (1978), died on 8 March.

25 IZ

BRUCE STERLING

Well, if it weren't for good old *Interzone*, I couldn't possibly be where I am today. Which is, in stark point of fact, flat on my back in a guest room in Milan, Italy trying to steal wireless access from some unknown party downstairs, so that I can send a digital photograph to Italo Calvino's widow. I know that must sound pretty exotic, but it isn't. 25 years ago, the idea of writing Texan cyberpunk manifestos for a British post-new-wave radical-hard-sf mag with a circulation of dozens in glorious black and white...yeah, now *that* was an act of raw global daring. You have no idea how exciting that was. That experience was *much more* exotic than this. I used to send my *Interzone* copy by airmail on xerox paper. Wow.

Writing for *Interzone* was a hell of a lot more useful and lastingly important than the six assignments I'm currently avoiding: writing for a sports magazine, a design magazine, a fine-arts magazine, an Italian culture magazine, and a museum exhibit. I write for all these venues because they're so *much easier* than writing things worthy of *Interzone*. I got old, and I got lazy. Please forgive me.

DOMINIC GREEN

My first *Interzone* success was with 'Moving Mysteriously'. After a couple of failures, which had nevertheless both been returned with polite letters indicating that David Pringle had actually read the submissions – publishers and agents take note – I'd submitted 'Moving Mysteriously', and promptly forgotten about it. I was then telephoned by David during a period of unemployment, while I was in the bath. Being phoned up not just while you're in the bath, but while you're *unemployed* and in the bath, doesn't make for a good telephone manner. As soon as it became clear the nice Scots gentleman was phoning me up to buy one of my stories, however – gosh, did I ever acquire a good telephone manner in double quick time.

Happy 25th birthday. God bless *Interzone* and all who sail in her, and death dealt by ninja midgets from below to her enemies.

KEN MacLEOD

How well I remember snatching up an early issue of *Interzone*. Wow, a new British SF magazine! Haven't seen one for years. Oh look, a Ballard story about an ageing ex-astronaut...haven't seen one of them for years either. That issue isn't among my collectors' items. But IZ soon brightened, and I started buying it, and submitted stories, all mercifully rejected, and discovered new authors through stories or interviews: Gibson, Egan, Newman, McAuley, Reynolds, Stross...and the list goes on. Long may it continue.

BRIAN STABLEFORD

My involvement with *Interzone* began when I submitted the first short story I wrote in 1986, after giving up fiction writing five years before. I continued submitting regularly for some years thereafter, until the magazine turned into an inconveniently black hole from which no information emerged. David Pringle's position as editor led to his being recruited as an advisor to Simon & Schuster (UK), so he was instrumental in persuading me to submit some proposals there, including one for *The Empire of Fear* (their first choice, but not mine), whose eventual success encouraged me to quit my job and write full time – which was probably a stupid decision (but that wasn't his fault). All in all, I suppose the magazine played a significant role in my life for while, for which I probably ought to be more grateful than I actually feel.

TERRY PRATCHETT

If there had been no *Interzone* to be the backbone of the British SF industry, then someone would have had to invent it. Fortunately, this happened.

PAUL MCAULEY

Summer 1987, Brighton, the World Science Fiction Convention. I'm a new author with a couple of short stories to my name and a forthcoming novel that only Malcolm Edwards and I know about. Malcolm is an editor with Gollancz, Gollancz is hosting the pre-Hugo Award party, and my unpublished novel gets me a ticket. In the press, a dapper young gent squints at my name badge. "Paul McAuley? I thought 'King of the Hill' was pretty good." 'King of the Hill' was the second story of mine that *Interzone* published; that was how I met Kim Newman.* What did *Interzone* do for me? It plugged me into the science fiction community, gentle reader, and turned me on. It was no small thing.

*I like to think that Kim said "pretty good," but it's possible that he may have said "interesting" instead. Kim spent his childhood in Somerset and that's where 'King of the Hill' is set, so whether or not he thought it any good, he would have found it of interest.

ADAM ROBERTS

Interzone for me means two things. One is the magazine, which I've been reading for years; distinctive, idiosyncratic, colourful, sometimes daft, often excellent, always unmissable. The other is the track on Joy Division's 1979 album *Unknown Pleasures*, an almost overwhelmingly dark, cavernous and soul-thrumming work. But that's not the *Interzone* you're asking me about. Right?

25 YEARS OF INTERZONE

EDWARD MORRIS

I first met *Interzone* in 2003, reading Lord Pringle's first *Best Of* anthology during a blizzard. I never got up the nerve to submit anything until 2005, after Paul Di Filippo suggested that I do so. Those first two submissions have turned into an avalanche of correspondence, friendship, good advice and a finger on the throbbing pulse of SF itself. I worked my first WorldCon at the *Interzone* dealer's table and had what can only be described as a blast with Jetse and the pros. So maybe I'm a little biased, but here's to *Interzone*'s 25th...and 250th.

ELLEN DATLOW

Interzone has been a crucial (and in its early years the *only*) showcase for science fiction and fantasy in the UK since its first issue. I've been reading it since nearly its beginning (if not the beginning). It not only introduced me to fiction by British writers, but also to early stories by the Americans Michael Blumlein and Richard Kadrey – both of whose work I subsequently bought for *Omni*. In addition to publishing some extraordinary fiction, the magazine regularly commissioned illustrations and covers that were a lot more attractive than most of what was being used in other sf magazines at the time. In fact, several years ago I bought a black and white print by Judith Clute that graced the magazine back in 1982.

The early consortium of editors and then David Pringle alone did a fantastic job for more than two decades before David turned over the magazine to the new team, who have brought the magazine into the 21st century with a new look and a slightly different focus. All magazines need a makeover every few years or they stagnate. I'll happily follow *Interzone* wherever it goes in the next decades.

SARAH ASH

Many readers are probably familiar with my 'Breakthrough Thanks to *Interzone*' story, but it's worth repeating, because '*Interzone* did it for me!' After years of slush pile rejections, I turned my hand to short story writing; I'd rejected it up till then because, like chamber music, it's such a hard form to do well. My first acceptance by *Interzone* was 'Mothmusic' in 1992 (my heartfelt thanks to David Pringle and Lee Montgomerie) and not long after it appeared in issue 62, I received that magical and life-changing telephone call from Deborah Beale at Orion, asking to see the fantasy novel *Interzone* had been kind enough to mention that I had recently completed. The stuff of writers' dreams...

That initial call led to my first contract and the publication of *Moths to a Flame* in 1995. However, the sting in the tail – for me, at

any rate – was *Interzone*'s utter impartiality toward its 'own'; my first novel then received a critical pasting in the very magazine that had made its publication possible. Sigh.

As a footnote, I've always admired the high standards of design and illustration to be found in *Interzone*. Out of all my stories to be published so far, 'Mothmusic' was the only one to be illustrated – by Martin McKenna – and I'm sure that his atmospheric pictures did much to draw readers' attentions to my words. Thanks, guys! Here's to the next 25 years!

MERCURIO D. RIVERA

Speculative fiction magazines pop into and out of existence these days like transient quantum particles, which makes *Interzone*'s successful 25 year run all the more worthy of commemoration. From a new writer's perspective, having a high-quality market for hard SF still around – and looking better than ever – is certainly cause for celebration, particularly given *Interzone*'s supportive and nurturing editorial approach. The most encouraging rejection I ever received was on my first submission to *Interzone* of a satirical SF story that was on the cusp of being publishable. Because the editorial staff thought the story showed promise, the rejection notice included unbelievably extensive feedback from four editors. As a result, when I wrote 'Longing for Langelana' (my first significant sale, published in *Interzone* 204), it was with the knowledge that I was on their radar and that the story would receive careful scrutiny, a great motivator for any writer. My upcoming story, 'The Scent of Their Arrival', benefited from the insightful input of *Interzone* editor Jetse de Vries, for which I'm grateful. Needless to say, it's been an honor working with Andy and the team and having my work appear in such a highly regarded publication with such professional standards. For readers and writers alike, let's hope that *Interzone* continues to thrive and to open windows into the imagination for at least another 25 years.

DOUGLAS SIROIS

Interzone has been a sort of relief for me. It is a magazine made of great imaginative stories and art. I really enjoy the variety of stories I am assigned to illustrate. I am always on my toes not knowing what's in store the next month. It has helped me open my eyes to new ways of visualizing new worlds and creations. I believe *Interzone* sets the standard high for science fiction and fantasy short stories.

More to come! If you would like to send something for this feature please post it to the editorial address or email it to 25@ttapress.demon.co.uk

25 FILM

To update a famous William Goldman routine of the era, the year of *Interzone's* bow would have been a solid one by anyone's standards if it had only produced *Liquid Sky*, *Android*, *Cat People*, and *The Last Unicorn*. But none of these is much remembered now, overshadowed as they are by the landmark films of that year: *Tron*, a pivotal work for the relationship between film, games, and digital worldmaking; *Conan the Barbarian*, the bumpy launch of the decade's biggest star, and the first film of the early-eighties sword-and-sorcery miniboom to do major, sequel-provoking business; John Carpenter's *The Thing*, which has quietly grown into one of the most imitated films of its era; and above all Nicholas Meyer's *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, which defibrillated the series so nearly stillborn in Robert Wise's launch number, made long-running film afterlives of cancelled TV series a realistic possibility for the first time, and would ultimately carry the baton of space cinema during the long hibernation of *Star Wars*. But none of these won the Dramatic Presentation award in

the following year's Hugoes. Why? Well, 1982 was also the year of *ET: The Extraterrestrial* – which didn't win the award either, because 1982 was also the year of *Blade Runner*.

So OK, arguably 1982 was a bit special, SF cinema's own little 1939. But it does illustrate the difficulty with lists like this: there are actually far more top ten films than there are integers between 0 and 11. Miyazaki alone has made at least four, and even operating arbitrary rules like disallowing more than one entry per filmmaker, I couldn't find space for Spielberg, Cronenberg, Cameron, Burton, Lynch, Pixar, Potter, or any of the comics adaptations that have been such a potent force in keeping phenomenally expensive fantasy cinema afloat. Nevertheless, here are ten films that in their different ways felt like nothing you'd ever seen film attempt before, and which it still seems completely extraordinary ever got made. Against odds in an age where fantasy and horror have tended to hog the genre baton, all but a couple are proper science fiction.



10 DARK CITY 1998

Alex Proyas' astonishing pocket-universe fable still seems to come out of nowhere, delivering a classic conceptual breakthrough that makes *The Matrix* look as silly as it, well, is. Proyas then vanished again for twice as long as before, and when he came back it was to make *I, Robot*. But *Dark City* spins on through its own unearthly void.



9 STAR WARS EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH 2005

Do *Star Wars* films still matter? For lots of people, the answer was already a resounding no in 1982, only confirmed by the arrival of *Jedi* the following year. But *Sith* staked its claim by closing the cycle with the most breathtaking space cinema ever attempted, from the opening orbital gobsmacker to the unprecedented gallery

of interplanetary settings at the climax, and tying it all to a naked allegory of Cheney-era geopolitics that still felt no embarrassment about being completely and cringemakingly a *Star Wars* film.

8 REPO MAN 1983

The eighties were a golden age of fresh, frenetic low-budget B-movies, most now long past their hour. But *Repo Man* always towered above its rivals, and if anything looks more extraordinary now that all the slightly-stoned cheapies with iffy effects from the same period have fallen off the radar of history. In a familiar sign of an enduringly great film, nobody involved was ever as good again.



7 LORD OF THE RINGS: FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING 2001

Later instalments were hobbled by ill-considered story improvements, indecisive scripting, and studio infighting over the cut; but that only makes this landmark first episode seem the more miraculously sure-footed in its trot through the pitfalls, with more JRRT dialogue and less tin-eared kiwi ersatz, and the more breathtaking for coming on a sceptical world who genuinely didn't know that this would indeed be, for better and for worse, the biggest thing ever.

6 STARSHIP TROOPERS

1997

Verhoeven's greatness as a maker of science fiction lies in his breathtaking mastery of deadpan, the ability to make films work simultaneously as satire and as straight action tosh. Of his four sf films, *Troopers* is the one that strikes the most delicate balance of straightfaced irony and gleeful brutality. Watch it again and marvel not just at *Robocop* co-writer Ed Neumeier's scalpel-sharp encissorment of the Heinlein text and voice, but at the genuine brilliance of Caspar van Dien's career-destroying lead performance, the kind of thing that makes it impossible to cast you as anything else ever again. I wish I could love the straight-to-rental sequel, also scripted by Neumeier but best left unwatched.



5 THE PRESTIGE

2006

A film that, like the novel it so artfully doubles, treats genre as merely one more box from which to contrive dazzling illusions and daring escapes, and so exquisitely constructed that all other scripts – and especially *The Illusionist*, on which I'm happy not to get started – seem to belong to an age of dentistry with stone tools. Non-linear storytelling has never been so fluent, and just working out what you're seeing in certain scenes needs half-a-dozen viewings to nail. At the moment I'm particularly loving Michael Caine (has he ever been better?) and the limitlessly inventive facial hair design.



4 BLADE RUNNER

1982, 1993

How many films have made cinema history twice over? For the rest of its decade this was the film that everything else wanted to be: dark blue urban, hardboiled and trenchcoated, chase-driven, kipple-rich. It made Dick the most bankable sf author of the era, while differing from what came after in actually filming a major novel rather than just nicking the premise and first act of an early short and gluing a chase movie on to the stump. And then, eleven years after changing the landscape of film the first time around, the accidental escape of an early alternate version launched the whole phenomenon of variously so-called director's cuts – as well as revealing that Ford was bloody awful even without the voiceover, and that whoever decided to lose the unicorn knew best after all. But there are shards of astonishing beauty in both image and script that have yet to be surpassed. "All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain." Feel that? Me too, every time.

3 ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND

2004

One of the most sheerly sophisticated films ever to come out of Hollywood, with dialogue moving fluidly between

layers of reality in a way that makes more overtly Dickian films look positively dickless. Part-times genius Charlie Kaufman crams the clockwork into the watch as if the inside is bigger than the outside, and Michel Gondry's bizarrely inventive direction tears up the rulebook with insanely lo-tech effects (sometimes just a single domestic light bulb). The one disappointment is the softened ending, whose intended ambiguities are themselves completely missed without the commentary anyway; the original draft followed Kirsten Dunst's character fifty years into the future, where we learn that Carrey and Winslet are doomed to spend the rest of their lives repeatedly erasing one another from their memories and rekindling their dysfunctional relationship as strangers.

2 BRAZIL

1984

The bolidic, climate-transforming impact of this vast, mad film is hard to conceive now for anyone who wasn't there at the time. (It may have been the first I reviewed here; I remember a Q&A with Gilliam when the film had been out here for weeks but the year-long battle over its US release hadn't yet blown up.) As long as *Solaris* and as surgically plotted as you'd expect from four drafts of Stoppard (who was then cheekily written over by Gilliam and his mate), it's less a demented dream-sequence remake of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (which Gilliam had never read) than a tour of the seething Gilliam brain-ducts at the precise moment of his maturation as a fully-formed master of filmmaking. Gilliam hit these heights one more time, in 1996's *Twelve Monkeys*; nothing in the twelve years intervening seemed able to stand in its shadow.



1 SPIRITED AWAY

2001

I didn't get this on first viewing. I couldn't get past the way it set up a complete and unbounded otherworld, let the character-design team go completely bonkers in populating it, and then stalled the story in that bloody bathhouse for the rest of the film, only letting us out for the glorious Delvaux train sequence. But the penny's since dropped that actually that's how Miyazaki's best films work: box in the transcendence, get the audience comfortable with the walls of the story (the *verticality* of the bathhouse is crucial here), then whisk the barriers away for a soaring climax that leaves your stomach gasping on the ground. In this and in a dozen other vital ways, Miyazaki's body of work offers a single-handed glimpse of how much higher fantasy film can fly when it's not ballasted to death by Hollywood narrative doctrine. Resident Miyazaki anorak Sophie (8) was so incensed when her teacher told her all stories have to have villains that she took the film into school and made the whole class watch it. I almost popped with pride.

Nick Lowe's regular film column *Mutant Popcorn* has been appearing in *Interzone* for almost as long as the magazine has existed. In his other life he is Senior Lecturer in Classics at Royal Holloway, University of London.

STEPH SWAINSTON: THIS

Steph Swainston has a confession to make. She's never read Tolkien.

Actually, it's not much of a confession; nor is it intended to be a badge of rebellious pride for one of the most celebrated fantasy literary debutantes of recent years to wear. It's just a matter of fact; Steph Swainston has never read Tolkien. So what? Move on. There's nothing to see.

And moving on is what Swainston, 30, specialises in. Her debut novel, *The Year of Our War*, introduced a fresh new concept in the world of fantasy fiction: a whole imagined world full of the usual tropes of the genre – heroes, immortals, a shining castle, invading monsters – yet which turns all of them on their heads.

The novel, along with its follow-ups *No Present Like Time* and *The Modern World* (out now), focus on Jant, the flawed protagonist who stands out in the world of the Fourlands due to his ability to fly. A hybrid of two races, one of which sports useless avian protuberances from their shoulder-blades, Jant's abilities allow him to enter the Circle of the immortal Eszai, the Fourlands' most technically accomplished individuals in whatever their speciality happens to be, whether it's swordsmanship, seafaring, archery or, in Jant's case, travelling across the landscape quicker than anyone else, which qualifies him to be the Circle's trusted messenger.

Perhaps Swainston should read Tolkien after all. She might have something in common with him. Like old JRR, this Bradford-born Cambridge graduate immerses herself totally in her fictional world, and over almost a quarter of a century has amassed hundreds of thousands of words of background material detailing everything you could ever want to know about the Fourlands and their inhabitants, most of it which will probably never make it into print.

"It's about filling in the gaps," muses Swainston. "For example, I was thinking the other day about rubber. There's no tropical climate in the Fourlands, so they wouldn't have rubber. Which would mean no tubes, say, for medical purposes. And no soles for trainers."

That last point is crucial to Swainston's whole philosophy of the Fourlands. It is a fantasy world; where else do you find



photograph © 2004 Trevillion

INTERVIEW BY DAVE MARTIN

insects as big as Jersey cows breaching an inter-dimensional barrier and slowly trying to take over the world? But that doesn't mean her characters have to hunch over flagons of mead, served up in taverns staffed by elves, and mutter about quests to liberate gold coins from dragons.

Swainston's world is one where civilisation and economics has developed and thrived, where there is society and government (via the Eszai's individual fiefdoms and the greater, overarching 'United Nations' of the Circle in their impregnable Castle, which oversees the war on the invading Insects). And where people wear T-shirts and trainers, and there are marathons and something very similar to football. And where there are also newspapers.

"Tolkien's heroes are of the Anglo-Saxon tradition," says Swainston, who refers to her series with the shorthand 'the Castle books'. "Protectors of their community. My Eszai are influenced more by ancient Greek ideas of heroes – competitive, upholding ideals and very often complete bastards.

"The Castle's system is based on merit, but strictly it isn't a meritocracy because the Eszai don't rule. The governors rule their manorships, the governor of Hacilith looks after Morenzia and Awia is ruled by its monarch. Eszai are only in charge of conducting the war. But the Castle's system of merit is the best system there could be, and it's only possible because it's maintained fairly."

Complete bastards her Eszai may be, or sometimes just weak, which is something else we don't expect our traditional heroes to be. Jant has a penchant for the Fourlands' narcotic of choice, which sometimes impairs his ability to do his job.

Flawed individuals, thrown together in a circle of the elite, gazed upon enviously by the mortals who watch their every move via a sensation-hungry media? Why, that almost sounds like...

"*Big Brother*," agrees Swainston. "In a way, you could say the Castle books are a study of fame. The Circle are the Fourlands' celebrities, people who very often come from nowhere and experience instant fame

IS THE MODERN WORLD



the MODERN WORLD Steph Swainston

Steph Swainston's writing is as elegantly superior to most other fantasy as a literary sword is to a blunt dagger. *—*Michael Moorcock

The Modern World Gollancz, 336pp, £14.99 hb

as they are inducted into the Circle.

"The difference is, I suppose, that the Eszai have to work and practice their talents to challenge other immortals for a place in the Circle. Our culture promotes flair and instant success, not hard graft. The Eszai know what it really takes to succeed."

Swainston's books can be read on two levels in almost every aspect. They are, if that's all you want out of them, fantasy adventures. But they also offer startling parallels to our own world and society – some of them deeply personal to the author.

For example, in the closing chapters of the second book, a huge riot takes place. These scenes are directly informed by the riots of summer 2001 in her native Bradford, the worst civil disturbances in mainland Britain for two decades.

Swainston recalls: "I was on the top deck of a bus when someone threw a brick through the window – I ended up sheltering under the bus seat.

"Similarly a BMW showroom was smashed and twenty cars stolen. In No

Present Like Time I couldn't describe cars, obviously but the looting and using carts to smash shop fronts are all based on scenes I witnessed in the riots in Bradford."

When she isn't putting things that have happened to her into the book, Swainston is out actively searching for new experiences to give her writing a more realistic edge. To achieve the right level of description for Jant's swooping, soaring flight, Swainston took to the skies in gliders and Microlights.

For *The Modern World*, some of the action takes place underground, so Swainston promptly booked herself some potholing expeditions in Wales and her native Yorkshire. She's also visited a falconry centre and tried her hand at hot-air ballooning in the name of research, as well as archery and even fencing.

All of which would be remarkable enough, were it not for the fact that Swainston suffers from chronic back pain due to a car accident some years ago. For someone who earns her living from writing, she is hampered by the fact she can't sit down for longer than fifteen minutes at a time.

But in those short but regular bursts of creativity – fuelled by a lifetime of making up stories around the Fourlands since she was a little girl – Swainston has produced three Castle books. Those eagerly anticipating *The Modern World* will be pleased to know the focus is once again on Jant, while there are major developments in the war with the Insects.

"It also shows the nicer side of some of the Eszai," says Swainston. "They're not bastards all the time!"

With *The Modern World*, Swainston has further established and added depth to her characters and their painstakingly-detailed world. Her initial contract with Gollancz was for three books, which have now been delivered. But the Castle series was never intended to be a trilogy, despite some early misconceptions from the fan press.

"It's not a finite series of three books," she says. "There are many, many more Castle stories to tell."

The first three books form a self-contained cycle, her exploration of the nature of competition and how people will do anything to rise to the top in an

elite circle. Swainston was the first of her family to go to university and some of her observations on the Castle and the nature of its immortal Circle are based upon the class divisions she says she found at Cambridge.

As to what comes next, she is playing her cards close to her chest as to the future of the series, saying only that she is "considering several options." Whether these are with Gollancz remains to be seen, but she is toying with writing a non-Castle book next, although possibly still set in the Fourlands.

With comparisons to Mervyn Peake, M. John Harrison and China Miéville, Swainston found herself – thanks to the latter – lumped in with the short-lived 'New Weird' fantasy literature movement. It's not something she was overly excited by.

"New Weird doesn't mean anything to anybody," she insists. "It was just a cynical marketing ploy."

One that the fans, though, took to their hearts, albeit briefly. Fandom is something else that Swainston has a somewhat uneasy relationship with. She prefers actually writing to spending huge chunks of time at conventions talking about writing.

"I'm not what you might call 'fannish,'" she concedes. "Fans have a lot of influence with publishers, largely because they are a very visible group of readers. It seems to me that a few of the loudest voices can have a disproportionate effect on what ends up being written and published. Those who count themselves as active fans in the genre are really a tiny proportion of the market."

"I hope my work can be read by a mainstream audience as well as a fantasy audience."

There will be quite a few readers among the mainstream audience that Swainston craves for her novels who will not have read Tolkien either. Just as many fantasy fans will naturally have done so, neither is a familiarity with decades of genre tropes strictly necessary to enjoy her work.

With one cycle of books under her belt and still only just in her thirties, Swainston has plenty of time to consider those options. One way or another, it is indeed time to move on. There is, however, plenty to see if Steph Swainston has her way. ▀



Who are the people that inspire you?

Well, there are so many people that give me inspiration. First off, my wife, family and friends all support what I do and influence me immensely. As for art, at an early age I was very excited by comic book artists like Frank Miller and John Byrne, and of course fan favourites like Todd McFarlane and Jim Lee. As my love for the sequential art form evolved I found Dave McKean and George Pratt whose painterly art opened my eyes to the world of experimentation and mood. Pretty soon I was introduced to N.C. Wyeth, Edmond Dulac, Gustav Doré, Norman Rockwell and Maxfield Parish, all of whom inspire my present day work. I am very influenced by modern science fiction and fantasy artwork, and I have a great love for cinematography in films. I am also very influenced by music and all sorts of sounds from all over the world. I read once that if you listen to many different types of music, the more creative you will be.

How do you work?

I work in many different mediums, but most of the illustrations for *Interzone* are painted using Corel Painter and Adobe Photoshop. I love working digitally because it is so fast. There's no waiting for paint to dry and there's no mess, but there's nothing like the unpredictability of paint and the brush stroke. At the end of the day when you finish a painting, you have something tangible that you can hang in a gallery. I do a lot of acrylic paintings and watercolour work and when I get the chance to do mixed medium pieces I always have pleasure exploring new possibilities of working. I work a lot from photo references, most of which I shoot myself. I always start off with a good solid idea when it comes to approaching illustration. To me, great ideas are what separate good illustrations from bad ones as well as strong drawings and technical skills. What I have found to be most important is that you have fun, period.

Doug Sirois was born and raised in Massachusetts. He graduated from the Art Institute of Boston in 2001 earning himself a BFA in illustration. He has since illustrated and designed everything from children's book covers and CD covers to clothing and apparel. Clients in the past have included Wong Doody Advertising Agency, Authentic Hendrix, Grateful Dead Inc, New Earth Productions, Dragonfly Clothing Company, Santana Licensing, *Interzone*, IDW Publishing, Fantasy Flight Games, Margaret Weiss Productions, legendary bass player Bootsy Collins, Ben Harper, Club D'elf, DJ Disk, and the 80s band DEVO. He is now teaching, and working hard towards a Master of Fine Arts degree in illustration at CalState, Fullerton. He currently resides in Claremont, California with his wife Jenn, his dog Miles, and his kitten Willow.





What do you really want to do?

Being an illustrator I have found that you must find a start and work your way up the project food chain. Everyone's looking for their big break. I love storytelling and narrative illustration. I want to illustrate book covers and see my work at local book shops. I would love to be able to publish my own books, whether graphic novels or art books. I have always wanted to start my own production studio to work on numerous projects: book covers, graphic novels, films, and anything else that utilizes illustration as a form of storytelling. This is my dream. I would also like to teach at the college level or do workshops and have some sort of impact on the next wave of illustrators.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

Hm, good question. I had a teacher who once said that the true success of graduating art school is if you are still involved or have a job involved with art five years later. I am happy where I am and I hope I'm just at the beginning of a long journey as an illustrator. I pray that in five years I'll have some steady clients who keep me busy and challenged from day to day, contacting me for work that only I do. I hope to be able to teach and have a successful freelance illustration business and start to build the foundation for a production company. I hope to have already started a family with my lovely wife. I look positively toward the future and pray that it is good to the Earth and all of us.



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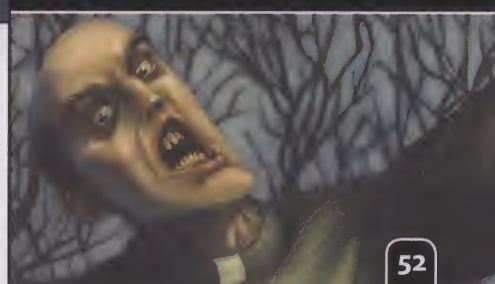
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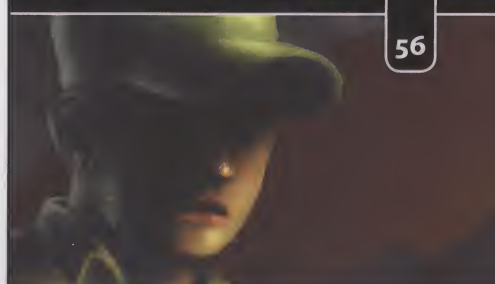
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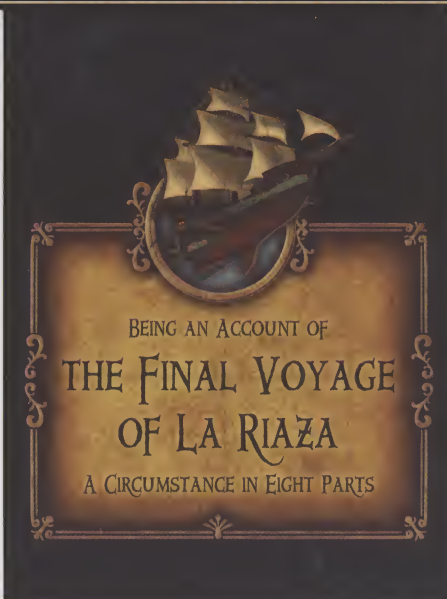


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Jayme Lynn Blaschke has been writing for a long time, and will likely be writing for a long time to come. His background is in journalism, and for seven years he worked at the *Temple Daily Telegram* as a sports writer but also interviewing such notable figures as Hillary Clinton and George W. Bush – though not at the same time. After leaving the *Telegram*, Jayme did time in the public affairs department of a large regional hospital for a few years, got back into newspapers, and is now gainfully employed in the News Service office at Texas State University.



Doug Sirois: This story was a ton of fun for me to work on. I loved developing characters and creating the look for this story. I tried to break the story into the parts that I felt were key points and most interesting to illustrate. The best part of this project was figuring out and creating the orrery.

THE FINAL VOYAGE OF LA RIAZA by JAYME LYNN BLASCHKE illustrated by DOUGLAS A. SIROIS



Grand Dame of the Brazos Fleet

A gust of thick, salty air lashed *La Riaza*. The airship, third-largest of the Brazos fleet at 537 feet bow-to-stern, groaned and strained against her moorings. Her phantom shadow lumbered up the thick, stonework mooring towers, then retreated. The fore gangplank shifted, and a pair of bare-chested airmen carrying a nested stack of turtle shells aboard stumbled, losing their sweat-slick grip on the load. The man-sized shells clattered onto wood, then down to the trampled black mud below. Their polished turquoise- and cobalt-blue surfaces glinted in the fading light.

The outer cloudbands of the approaching storm had thickened throughout the day, and now effectively ruled the sky with their gray murk. The entire city of Puerto Jabrón seemed to hold its breath against the oncoming storm.

"Madre dios!" shouted First Mate Diego Brazos, running over to the fallen shells. He knelt, running his hard, brown hands over their smooth surfaces. A nick on one. A bad scuff on another. Nothing serious. The third, however, the third had an ugly crack running from its edge halfway to the center. "You're worse than groundlings, the both of you! It's cracked, and won't even bring a quarter of the others' worth at auction. Next time, drop yourselves and break you stinking necks. It'll save me both headache and money."

The two airmen scrambled down the gangplank to collect the shells, not daring to look directly at Diego.

"And don't think I'm not taking the difference out of your salaries, because I am."

"Winds change all the time, Señor Brazos. No one can anticipate every spot of turbulence," said a tired, dusty voice. Diego spun to find Capitan Ancira behind him. Whip-thin, bald and shrunk with age, Ancira had outlasted many younger captains – and ships as well. "I doubt docking these crewmen's pay will make or break the company's profit margins. Don't you agree, Señor Brazos?"

"Aye," Diego answered tightly. "No need to dock anyone's pay."

The airmen bobbed their heads in acknowledgment of their good fortune, and – lest Capitan Ancira depart and leave them to face Diego's wrath alone – hurried up into the ship with the recollected shells.

"Now, Señor Brazos, I believe you owe me some ballast sheets?" Capitan Ancira said, clamping his hand on Diego's shoulder. The thin fingers were hard as steel.

"Here, Capitan. You'll find everything in order."

Ancira accepted the sheaf with a grunt of acknowledgment. "You've got *La Riaza* unbalanced in sections three and four of the aft hold," he said almost immediately.

"We're holding that space for the Baumgarten cargo. We've contracted for transport of four mermaids. They'll command an outstanding price on Ansuly."

"Baumgarten, you say?" Ancira scratched his sparse beard as he studied the ballast sheets. "Move one barrel of whale oil from section seven to three, and two from eight to four. That ought to keep us trim enough." He thrust the ballast sheets back at Diego. "Hermann Baumgarten's been promising live mermaids to anyone who'll bargain going on nine years now, and I've only seen him deliver twice. I'll not risk that coming storm on his account. Make ready to cast off, Señor Brazos. I want us off this Dios-forsaken ball of mud in ten minutes. And I expect those ballast sheets to be corrected."

Diego caught two airmen in the keel catwalk and set them to reordering the oil barrels as the ship's bells began clanging liftoff warnings. The ground crews scrambled for the mooring towers.

Clambering down the stair to the pilot house, Diego held out the revised ballast sheets. "Corrected, Capitan."

"I was beginning to wonder if you were going to make it on time. Breathing a little hard, are we?" Capitan Ancira took the offered pages. "Assume your station, and signal cast off."

Diego took the elevator wheel, then rang out the 'cast off' signal. Immediately, *La Riaza* drifted back with the wind. The loosed mooring lines slipped free of the towers, quickly pulled in and stowed by airmen in the bow and stern. The silver ship rose smoothly into the sky. Emerald striping ran along the lines of the ship's ribs from the folded masts and rigging at the bow to the low-slung pilothouse and horizontal, boxy complex of rudders and elevators at the stern.

"Keep us trimmed up against this wind, Señor DeLuna," Capitan Ancira said to the Pilot at the rudder wheel. "Señor Brazos, kindly inform Pedemaestro Cisneros we'll be wanting full velocity from his gigapedes."

Diego grabbed the brass whistle dangling from the speaking tube and blew a sharp shriek into it. "All ahead full!"

Four nacelles boxed the stern of *La Riaza*, just ahead of the rudder complex, just behind the pilothouse. The tell-tale squeal of the long drive shafts pierced the

air as the gigapedes began their march in the prophouse within the bowels of the ship. The nacelles' great props began to turn, slowly at first, then faster, pushing the airship into the oncoming storm. Below, Diego saw crews moving two smaller airships from the whaling fleet into hulking hangars to wait out the storm. A moment later, *La Riaza* passed above the Jabrón Cliffs, and black sea roiled beneath her.

The pilothouse lamps flickered on as the nacelle dynamos roused to life.

La Riaza shuddered as the buffeting increased. Lightning flashed in the distance.

"I'm a fool, men. An over-confident fool. I delayed our departure too long," Capitan Ancira said gravely. "Never fly a lady into a gale, least of all a fat-bellied, fully laden one like *La Riaza*. Señor Brazos, increase our pitch fifteen degrees. We've got to get above those clouds."

"Aye, Capitan," Diego said, spinning his wheel. The deck shifted beneath him, and bits of leaf and pebble skittered down the slope. Fat raindrops splattered against the glass windscreen. Far below, Diego saw a whaler trying to outrun the oncoming wall of clouds, its lone triangular dropsail flailing wildly. The whaler was doomed.

"Closing rapidly on the ceiling, Capitan," said DeLuna as rain pelted his forward windscreen. Far off the starboard bow, a funnel cloud dropped down, wrenching up the sea into a towering waterspout. "It's going to be rough going for a while."

"That it is, that it is," said Capitan Ancira. "Señor Brazos, sound for heavy weather."

Diego sounded the whistle signal as black cloud enveloped *La Riaza*. The ship shuddered and shook. Sheets of water splayed across the windscreens in a constant barrage. The wind and rain bellowed so that Diego could barely hear the worrisome groan and creak of the airship's timbers. Barely.

"*La Riaza's* an old lady, but she's a strong one," Capitan Ancira said, as if reading Diego's mind. "We've weathered worse than this, she and I. She'll hold together."

Lightning flashed, throwing a blinding blaze through the pilothouse. Thunder slammed the ship, shattering Diego's windscreen.

Diego blinked, phantom snakes of light corkscrewing across his vision. He was lying on the floor. Water sprayed in on him. Confused, he lifted his arm. Blood ran crimson from a dozen embedded shards. A strong hand grabbed his collar and hoisted him up.

"Tie it down!" Capitan Ancira shouted

in his ear. "Help me tie it down, damnit! And for Dios sake, don't fall through!"

Diego nodded, and staggered to the opening. His wheel'd been locked into place. Fighting the inrushing rain, Diego reached above the shattered glass, untying the rolled canvas. Capitan Ancira did the same on the opposite end, and then pulled it down over the windscreen, clamping it into place through brass eyelets.

Breathing heavily, Capitan Ancira leaned against the elevator wheel and began to laugh.

"What?" gasped Diego. "What's so funny?"

"You can hear me, and I can hear you," Capitan Ancira said, grinning.

"Look outside, Diego," DeLuna said from his station.

White cloud billowed past.

"Irony, no?" said Capitan Ancira. "We catch the worst of it right at the end."

The Buitre Swoops

La Riaza broke through the cloudtops, water streaming a trailing rainbow from every surface. To starboard, dipping toward the horizon, the sun sparked brilliantly. To port, the giant orange-and-gold swirl of Cibola, the parent world. Above, the indigo sky rippled and undulated in constant motion: the Cielo Mar.

"Time to reach the Cielo Mar, Señor DeLuna?" Capitan Ancira asked.

"An hour, Capitan."

"Good. Señor Brazos, signal airman Zarzamora to pilothouse duty. When he arrives, I'll see you in my stateroom."

"Damn, Diego. What'd you do?" DeLuna asked once Capitan Ancira had gone.

"Nothing but keep us on time and on budget, Antonio," he answered, wincing with each glass shard he plucked from his arm. "And bring a little discipline to this ship. It's borderline criminal what Ancira lets the crew get away with."

DeLuna let out a low whistle. "Better not say that around the other officers. Menendez and Cisneros have served under Capitan Ancira for a long time. They worship him. So does the crew. So do I. Don't expect them to line up behind you just because your padre is the owner."

"Hmph. I've known Orlando Cisneros longer than that. The only thing he worships is women with swivel in their hips," said Diego as Zarzamora came clomping down the stair.

"Reporting as ordered, Señor."

"Well. Better go see what the old man wants."

Capitan Ancira's cramped stateroom doubled as *La Riaza's* command center, and a huge navigational map covered the table that filled nearly the entire room. A large circle representing Cibola anchored the center of the map. Around Cibola were broken concentric circles representing the paths of the daughter worlds: Ary and Asay, the two innermost offering nothing but slow, painful death; the four living worlds of Marlino (which they were currently departing), Ansuly, Cyodne and Jaysos; and barren Vra, airless and unreachable beyond the Cielo Mar. Various counters cluttered the maps, vying for position beneath the ship's copper and brass clockwork orrery as Capitan Ancira calculated the course for Ansuly.

"Diego, do you know why I do not staff a navigator on my ship, and instead plot the course myself?" he asked without looking up.

"No, Señor."

"But you've wondered about it. I can tell. I do it to stay in touch with the soul of *La Riaza*. To remind myself what it's like to be the crew, where your actions have consequences. Plus, I'm good at it." He chuckled to himself. "I've seen too many capitanes relegate themselves to the role of commander, and lose contact with their ship, with their crews. If you forget that the men serving under you are living, breathing men, then you'll make mistakes. I make my share of mistakes, Diego, so I don't need to compound the matter any."

"I see," answered Diego.

"I'm not sure you do. I've seen you hand out punishments readily enough, Diego, but there's more to being a first mate than enforcing strict discipline. I know that, and your padre knows that. Which is why he had you assigned to *La Riaza*. The carrot and the stick works best if both carrot and stick are in balance. You have all the brains an outstanding commander needs, Diego, but your heart –"

A sharp whistle from the speaking tube cut him short. "Capitan Ancira here. What is it?" he answered.

"Lookout's spotted something," said DeLuna.

Capitan Ancira glanced at Diego. "We'll talk more, later."

They found airman Villescaz in the pilothouse with Zarzamora and DeLuna.

"Where is it?" asked Diego.

"There, Señor," Villescaz said, pointing toward the sun. "Up about ten degrees. It's hard to see."

"I take it you're the lookout who spotted it?" said Capitan Ancira, accepting the offered spyglass from DeLuna. "Hmm. Aye, that's definitely a ship. Damn hard to see. Moving fast, too. Good job, Villescaz."

He passed the spyglass to Diego. Peering at the speck, Diego made out the flicker of reflective silver hull...and a snatch of crimson. "There's a red sunburst on the bow. It's a Nueces ship."

"It's no accident, finding them here. Señor Brazos, I think it would be a good idea for you to take our airmen here and break out the weapons. It appears we have a *buitre* coming for us," Capitan Ancira said.

Diego raced back through the Capitan's stateroom with Zarzamora and Villescaz in tow, stopping at the heavy wooden door at the back of the room – one of only a handful on the ship. He pulled a key from his belt and opened the heavy iron lock. Inside the oilcloth-lined wooden vault were half a dozen long-barreled flintlock rifles with powder and shot packets, a like number of pistols and twenty rapiers. Diego buckled a rapier to his belt and tucked a pistol into his waist, then divvied up the remaining weapons for Zarzamora and Villescaz to distribute.

Returning to the pilothouse, he passed pistols and rapiers to Capitan Ancira and DeLuna, who took them grimly.

"Where's the *buitre*?" Diego asked.

"Above us. Damn, but he's fast," DeLuna said, jerking the rudder wheel. "We lost sight of him a minute ago, but our men up top are keeping us informed."

"It's a smaller ship than *La Riaza*. Quicker, more agile. *La Tronda*, probably. They'll be dropping on us from above," Capitan Ancira said.

"While *La Riaza's* fully laden and waterlogged," complained DeLuna. "Dios! She handles like a pregnant cow."

"Don't talk that way. She might hear you and take offense," warned Capitan Ancira. "Señor Brazos, sound for battle. Their control car will be vulnerable, so have our riflemen concentrate fire on it when they're within eighty yards."

"Lookouts report the *buitre's* closed to within two hundred yards," Diego said. "Our airmen aren't in position yet."

"Then they've got less than a minute to get where they need to be," snapped Capitan Ancira. "Signal all stop."

"All stop," confirmed Diego. The lights in the pilothouse flickered off.

Zarzamora returned. "All weapons distributed. Pedemaestro Cisneros and

four airmen have the prophouse secured."

"Good. To take *La Riaza*, they'll need the prophouse intact," said Capitan Ancira. "This prize is worthless to them if it can't make the Cielo Mar. Then they'll try to take the pilothouse. They'll find more than they bargained for, though. Shipmaestro Menendez knows how to fight, and won't lose our aft positions."

A shout went through *La Riaza*, clear even without the voice tubes. A series of thumps followed, and the airship shuddered. "Grapples," said Diego.

"Keep an eye on the gas board, Señor Brazos," said Capitan Ancira. "I don't like this one bit."

The angry sputter of rifle fire erupted. The muffled, staccato bursts echoed throughout the airship.

"Capitan! We're losing pressure in gas cell number two!" shouted Diego as the pressure gauge needle trembled. "They've punctured us. They've punctured gas cell number two. We're losing helio –"

"Capitan! The buitre's attacking the bow!"

An ominous boom thundered over them, and *La Riaza* lurched. A moment later, the airship began listing to port.

"Damn that buitre bastard to Ary! They're rolling us," Capitan Ancira shouted. "They're not trying to take the ship. They're a leach, trying to suck us dry. They'll loot what they can and leave us for dead. All airmen to the bow! Now! Hurry before we're overrun."

"Their blood will fall from the sky like rain," said Diego, waving his rapier.

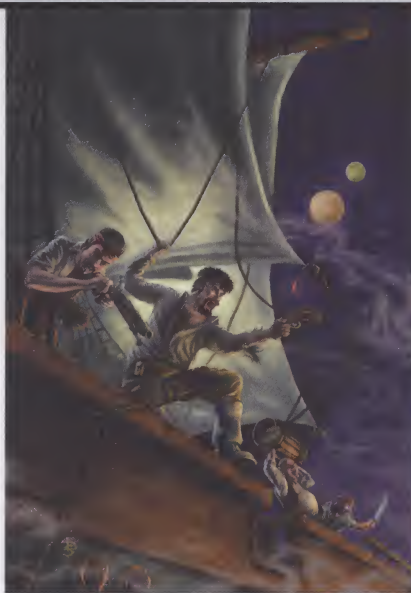
"Put that away before you hurt someone, Brazos. They've ripped one cell, and they'll rip as many more as they can." Running feet pounded the catwalk above the pilothouse, racing for the bow. "I'm going up front. This is more than Menendez can handle alone. If they're going to take my ship, they'll have to do it over my dead body," Capitan Ancira said. "DeLuna, make *La Riaza* a tough bitch for them to hold. I know, but do your best. If we succeed, we'll need you at the helm anyway. Brazos, think. What's the best way to get a fat, copperjaw leach off you once it's taken hold?"

"You burn it off, Capitan."

"Maybe you're not as dumb as you act," Capitan Ancira said without a hint of a smile. "Go to the aft hold. Take Zarzamora with you. If your ballast sheets are correct, you'll find all you need there to drop a nasty surprise on the buitre."

"Aye, Capitan."

"Aye, men. And Cibola be with us all."



A Gift of Conflagration

Diego scrambled up the stair with Zarzamora close behind. Already they had to hold an arm out against the railing to stay upright as the floor of the triangular catwalk tilted with the airship. Above them loomed the enormous yellow-grey gas cells.

"Step lively," warned Diego. "Stay on the planking as long as possible."

"Aye, Señor," Zarzamora answered.

Groans and creaks echoed throughout the ship. The sharp pop of gunfire came only sporadically, but the sulphurous stink of smoke filled the air. Water sloshed in the copper ballast tanks, which were no longer quite so safely to either side of the catwalk. The timbers bracing them creaked threateningly.

The catwalk skewed horizontal. The pair stepped onto the railing, steadying themselves against the opposite rail. The drive shafts hung silent between the gas cells, motionless. The ladder shaft up to the prophouse was now horizontal to the men. A bald man with an elaborate black moustache holding a flintlock looked at them from the prophouse entrance.

"Diego! What the hell is going on? One minute we're readying to fight boarders, and the next everything turns arse-end up!"

"I'll be happy to give you all the details later, Orlando," shouted Diego, "but right now we're a little short of time. Keep to orders – hold that prophouse at all cost."

Cisneros disappeared back into the prophouse, where Diego heard him telling the airmen, "...last to know *anything*..."

"They've almost rolled us," muttered Zarzamora.

"Yeah, and our crew is too busy holding

on for dear life to fight," said Diego. A sudden series of crashes echoed from the aft holds ahead. "And that would be barrels breaking free."

"Señor, we tied them *down*," Zarzamora said quickly, his bushy black brow creased with apprehension. "Nobody said anything about tying them *up*."

"We'll see," Diego said, testing the twin planks that ran along the top of the catwalk, now solidly underfoot. They held. "We'll see if luck is on our side."

He unlatched the wood-and-canvas door and stuck his head into the hold. A rank, fishy stench rolled out. Several barrels had broken free of the cargo netting-wrapped stack during the ship's roll and had smashed through the basket weave of boards that formed the ceiling. A few teetered on the edge of the hole. Miraculously, the netting held fast for the most part, with several dozen tightly stacked barrels clinging tightly to the upended floor. Some within the mass had sprung leaks, though, and slick honey-yellow oil spilled down to splash over the loose barrels.

"Tell me, which do you think easier to get out of there? Top or bottom?" Diego asked.

"Both'd be easier to get out than that stink," Zarzamora said, covering his nose with a sleeve. "I don't know how the whalers stand it."

"Right. The loose ones are already grounded, as it were, so we'll go with them," said Diego, stepping into the hold. His foot instantly slipped on splattered oil, and his leg fell through a gap in the ceiling.

"Are you hurt?" called Zarzamora.

"Damn, damn and damn," said Diego, flicking oil from his hand. His pants and jacket were soaked as well. "I'm fine. Dios, but this is nasty stuff. Let me see if I can get a grip on one of these..." He pulled himself up, then grabbed the nearest barrel. His grip slipped, so he climbed over it, and bracing himself against another, shoved it with his feet. The first barrel slid toward the door as the second fell through the hole. A taut *blimp* sounded from the hole as the barrel bounced off the gas cell.

"That was good. Just a little – *Argh!*" shrieked Zarzamora, jerking his hand away from the door. But it wouldn't budge. A gossamer white thread held it fast to the frame. A fat green-and-black araña del seda, half as long as Zarzamora's arm, scampered down the wall on its eight legs, trailing fibers from its abdominal spinners. "It ran right over my hand!"

"Did it bite you?" asked Diego. "Come

on man, are you bitten?"

Zarzamora, ashen-faced, shook his head.

"Then watch where you put your hands from now on," Diego said, tossing him a knife to cut himself free of the threads. "The fight'll have them all stirred up."

Diego shoved the barrel again, and Zarzamora managed a firm grip on the rim. A minute later, the two had wrestled it into the catwalk.

"What now, Señor?" Zarzamora asked, breathing hard.

"We take it to the fighting."

They rolled the barrel along the catwalk to the bow, past Capitan Ancira's stateroom, through the crew's quarters and galley. Gaps in the ceiling planks slowed them. They needed to lift the barrel past the ladder shafts leading to the pigeon well spaces between the gas cells. Occasionally they heard fighting – the snap of steel on steel, the pop of gunfire.

They reached the first of the foreholds, just past the fore ballast tanks. The ceiling was gone, roughly ripped away. A few broken boards lay scattered upon the gas cell below. The cargo was gone. They pressed on.

"This is it," Diego said, stopping finally at the cover for the pigeon well between cells NO.2 and NO.3. "Let's take a look."

"Señor, your voice. You're squeaking," Zarzamora said. "I am, too."

Diego nodded, peeled back the cover and they looked down. Cell NO.2 sagged flaccid, plump only in the section nearest Diego and Zarzamora. Cell NO.3 still looked full, but undulated like no intact cell should. Both were breached.

Beyond the gas cells, open space. *La Rianza's* outer hull was stripped away, the dorsal catwalk broken and lost. Grapples chewed into naked ribbing and folded masts. Just beyond the ribbing loomed the fat scarlet sunburst of the buitre, masts folded neatly against the hull.

"Just as pretty as you please," Diego said. "Makes a big target, don't you th—"

A bullet whipped past Diego's ear, splintering the floorboards above his head. He jerked back from the opening.

"Damned sharpshooters," Diego muttered, pulling his pistol from his belt. "Hanging from the access ladder on cell NO.2." He reached over the edge of the opening and fired. Smoke choked the catwalk.

"You hit him?"

"No, I wasn't even aiming at him. But he doesn't know that." Diego took his knife from his belt and sliced off an oil-soaked leg of his pants. He set the cloth against the barrel, then staked it in place with the knife.

"We're just run-of-the-mill airmen up here. Don't want him guessing what we're doing."

"I don't want to guess what we're doing," Zarzamora muttered.

"If there's one thing I know, it's that you meet all challenges with an overwhelming, disproportionate response. No half-measures. No rules of war," Diego said, his eyes hard and cold. He held his flintlock to the barrel. "They mean to send us to our deaths. I mean to send them to hell. And I have thirty-five gallons of hell right here to speed them on their way."

He pulled the trigger on his pistol. The flint sparked the oil-soaked pant leg. The flame quickly spread to cover the cloth. The reek of rancid fish grew stronger. With a heave, Diego pushed it through the opening.

The barrel tumbled down, past the baffled sharpshooter. Between the naked ribs of *La Rianza*. Onto the crimson hull of the buitre. It shattered against a mast, a wave of oil gushing across the airship. The buitre erupted in flames.

"Ary take you, you bastards."

"We'll all burn!" said Zarzamora.

"No, we're soaked to the bone from the storm. They're not. Here, take this," Diego said, passing his spent flintlock to Zarzamora. Then he reached to Zarzamora's belt and claimed the airman's pistol. "You'd probably better reload that when you get a chance."

"Thanks," Zarzamora said, eyeing the empty pistol with resignation. The airship lurched to the side, and Zarzamora looked at Diego in alarm. "What was *that*?"

"I believe that's the buitre cutting their grapples," Diego said, peering down the pigeon well.

The cut grappling lines dangled from *La Rianza* as the buitre pulled away. Flames licked the bow, consuming sail, rigging and hull. The ship rolled upright, but that only encouraged the fire to creep up the sides of the hull, enveloping the bow. A few buitre crewmen stranded aboard *La Rianza* made desperate leaps for their ship. Most fell far short, plummeting out of sight. A few hit the hull with dull whumps, only to slide over the edge, unable to find purchase.

Abruptly, the flames recoiled and the bow shrank into itself. The buitre's nose dipped, and it began a downward slide. The flames regained strength along the way.

Descent of Necessity

"Huh. It was *La Tronda*, after all. They've lost their first two gas cells. Maybe more." A humorless smile crept across Diego's face.

"They're overloaded with stolen cargo and on fire. They're done for," he said, bracing himself as best he could in the catwalk. *La Rianza* wobbled like a sick elephant, then rolled with alarming speed. Screams and splintering sounds echoed through the catwalk. Like a buoy tossed by waves, the airship swung one way, then the other before finding balance. Almost immediately, the bow began to dip. "So are we, it seems. Come on, back to the pilothouse."

They found DeLuna leaning heavily on the rudder wheel, his left arm hanging awkwardly at his side.

"Shoulder pulled loose," DeLuna said through clenched teeth. "Damn wheel spun like mad when the buitre cut loose. Thought it'd rip itself right off its mount."

"You're in no shape to pilot *La Rianza*, Antonio. I'll take your wheel," Diego said. "Zarzamora, take the elevator wheel. Keep her nose up as best you can."

The smoky trail of the buitre twisted away below them, disappearing into the storm's trailing cloud bands.

"We need to drop ballast," DeLuna said.

"I know that," snapped Diego. He grabbed at the ballast board, pulling hard on cables to drain the ballast tanks from midship to bow. From unseen vents beyond the curve of the bow, twin sprays of water flared out. *La Rianza's* nose edged up reluctantly. "The question is, do we have anyone left to help us keep this lady aloft?"

"If there's a way to keep *La Rianza* flying, Shipmaestro Menendez will find it," Zarzamora said.

"I wasn't questioning the Shipmaestro's dedication. I was questioning his health," Diego snapped. *La Rianza* slid into the clouds – white, wispy things completely unlike those that'd tried to rip the ship apart hours before. Suddenly, a squat keg – salted fish or coral wine, perhaps – fell away from the bow. Another followed. Soon, all manner of assorted bulk streamed from the airship. "Thank you, Menendez!"

The clouds peeled away, revealing a vast expanse of green sea.

"There! Twenty degrees to starboard," said DeLuna. "An island. Can you see it?"

"I see it. Wind's not cooperating, is it? Pedemaestro Cisneros," Diego called into the speaking tube, "Orlando, I need you. One-half velocity, props one and two only. Repeat, one and two only."

Obediently, the two lower props began to turn, pushing *La Rianza* forward. Diego spun his wheel, turning the ship crossways against the wind. The bow was still

hanging, but the ship's descent had slowed. Below, a pod of kelp whales – each nearly the size of *La Riaza* – swam serenely along, trailing long forests of inquilinic seaweed. The island grew closer.

"Oh, hell," said Deigo. "It's an atoll."

What appeared to be mountains from the distance was in fact the remnants of an ancient volcanic caldera. The rim still towered several hundred feet above the sea, but the southernmost section had collapsed, allowing a vast lagoon to form in the center of the ring.

"So, what now? Ditch in the sea and swim for it?" DeLuna asked, glancing down at his useless arm.

"I'm not losing this ship," Diego said. "We're putting in over the lagoon."

Zarzamora and DeLuna glanced each other's way.

"When Capitan Ancira gets back here, he can give the order to ditch. I won't," Diego said. "Feel free to jump out at any time."

Slowly *La Riaza* moved to the opening, passing above the brilliant reds and blues of the barrier reef. The walls of the caldera rose above the ship on either side, thick with lush green growth. The bow of the ship crept closer and closer to the water's surface, until it finally grated along the black-sand beach.

"All stop. All hands, secure the ship. Tie us down," Diego said, deflating as if he'd been holding his breath for the duration of the flight. "We've made it."

A Mutiny is Considered

Seaweed and thick yellow foam littered the beach, along with hordes of jellyfish and debris of all types. The occasional splintered trunk and tattered palm fronds testified to the strength of the passed storm.

Diego found Shipmaestro Bonifacio Menendez already ashore with three airmen, tying mooring lines to the thickest-trunked trees. His hairy belly stuck out beneath his grimy, sweat-soaked shirt. Blood from a gash atop his head had dried on his face, crusting his black beard. "Seven men," he said before Diego could speak. "We lost seven men to that buitire. Damn near lost *La Riaza*, too. Who's the fool that hit them with that burning barrel?"

"That fool was me," Diego answered.

Menendez nodded. "Figures. You're damn lucky we were soaked as we were. The old girl's still singed pretty bad. Even so, that stunt probably saved all of our hides. Not that I approve, mind you."

"That's nice to know. Where's Capitan?"

Menendez's face tightened. "Over there."

He nodded tersely to an arcing grove of palms that formed a semi-shelter. Two airmen knelt there over a supine figure.

Diego raced to Ancira, his haste clumsy and undignified in the fine sand. He reached the capitan, breathing heavily. The old man lay there with his shirt cut away, blood bubbling from a ragged hole in his right breast and another, smaller one beneath his right arm.

"Buitre sniper," said Menendez gravely.

"Missed his heart. Hit everything else."

"Why isn't he bandaged? Where is Ortiz? The surgeon – get him over here!"

"He is dead, too."

Ancira's eyes fluttered, focusing briefly on Diego. His left arm twitched, beckoning. Diego knelt down beside Ancira, placing his ear beside the capitan's mouth. He could hear the feeble, blood-strangled breaths bubble in the man's throat.

"I say...you're not ready," Ancira whispered, lips barely moving. "Prove me wrong."

Ancira coughed, blood flecking across Diego's face. Then Ancira lay still, stinking of fish and bloody raw meat.

Diego stood, silent. He stared down at Ancira, fists clenched. The sound of breakers came over the low peaks ringing the atoll. More crew had gathered on the beach. Diego looked at them. Some were wounded, sporting makeshift bandages. Some were scraped and bruised. All breathed heavily, exhausted. Diego looked down at his own arm. Most of the blood had dried, but a few of the cuts still oozed red. *La Riaza's* strong crew had dwindled to barely fourteen.

"Well then," Diego said finally, "what of *La Riaza*?"

The gathered crew murmured. Menendez frowned.

"What's done is done. He was a good capitan, and will be missed, but mourning him will not bring him back," Diego said. "*La Riaza* was his ship, and he would want us to look after her."

"Aye," said Menendez. "Indeed he would. The old girl's in a bad way. We've lost all helio from cell two, and most from cell three. Four doesn't look so good, either. Hull's all but lost topside, either ripped or burned away. I expect we'll find considerable damage to the superstructure ribbing – that buitire treated her pretty rudely. I can't even begin to guess on our masts and sails."

More crew had gathered. Diego counted a dozen men now, including DeLuna and bald Cisneros. All the surviving officers.

"Right, then. What needs to be done?"

"Done? For what?" asked Menendez

cautiously.

"To make *La Riaza* airworthy."

"Perhaps Señor Brazos did not understand," Menendez said slowly. "Gas cells two and three are lost. We can make repairs, close the rips if the hammered goldskin ain't stripped away. But even then, the helio's lost. Even shedding all ballast, *La Riaza* would drag her nose at best, turn stern-up at worst. She'd founder long before reaching Puerto Jabrón."

"If you can patch the holes, you can fill the cells. We have water, we have dynamos. Hidrógeno lifts as well as helio – even better, some say."

"El diablo has gotten into your head!" shouted a crewman stepping forward as he made the ward against evil. His patchy white hair stuck out in all directions, and his right arm hung to his side, a bloody bullet wound in his shoulder. "I didn't get shot up by that buitire just to follow you into madness. Sailing a hidrógeno ship is death for all aboard."

"I see," Diego said, nodding. "And you would be...?"

"Airman Jorge Balderas. Twelve tours under Brazos Company colors. The last four on *La Riaza*," Balderas said. Two more airmen stepped in behind him – the two who'd dropped the turtle shells at Puerto Jabrón. "This is Angel Del Hoyo and Tomás Navarro. They stand with me. We've all heard Capitan Ancira pull you aside, Brazos. We've seen him try to clean up your messes. We've seen how he coddled you because of who your father is. The whole crew has. Capitan Ancira gave you all of his wisdom, and none of it took. Hidrógeno ships are cursed ships, Brazos, and if you think any of us will fly with you, then you're a bigger fool than even I thought."

"Diego –" Cisneros began.

"That's quite enough, Orlando. The airman and I are having a discussion," Diego said with measured calm. Cisneros fell silent, shooting a worried glance at Menendez.

"My family has nothing to do with it," Diego continued to Balderas. "I was first mate. With Ancira gone, I am capitan by succession."

"You're a spoiled shit and a petty tyrant," Balderas snapped. "I don't care if Cibola herself descended from the Cielo Mar and anointed you Commodore of all the fleets what ever was or will be: I ain't flying with you. And neither is anyone else here, I reckon."

DeLuna and Cisneros glanced at each other. Menendez's frown deepened, and he

closed his eyes.

"So. It is mutiny, then?" Diego asked softly, barely audible above the breakers and creaking airship.

"If that's what you want to call it," Bald-
eras said, nodding, "then that's what it is."

Diego pulled the flintlock from his belt, put it to Balderas's face and fired. Balderas fell to the sand, blood pouring from his ruined head. With a fluid motion, Diego tossed the spent weapon to the sand and grabbed the one from Zarzamora's belt.

"Anyone else considering mutiny? No?" Del Hoyo and Navarro stumbled back from Balderas's corpse. "Good. Dead crewmen are piss-poor workers, but that's hard to tell with a lot like you lazy bastards. From now on you will address me as *Capitan Brazos*. Now get your arses to work, or that mutineer is going to have some company."



Gigapedes, Aranas and Hammered Goldskin

Diego ordered Capitan Ancira be buried beneath the trees where he'd died. He refused to bury Balderas, and forbade anyone else from doing so. Since he now carried three loaded flintlocks with him at all times, none of the crew was inclined to argue. Instead, they carried Balderas a ways up the beach, above the high tide mark, and left him for the crabs and seagulls to pick apart while they put all their efforts into repairing the airship.

La Riaza did not cooperate. Twice the airship ripped trees loose on opposite sides of the lagoon as the crew struggled to anchor the stern. Half again as wide as *La Riaza* was long, the lagoon was just deep enough to make the work close to impossible. Between

the crew's existing injuries and those earned freshly, more than a few drops of blood stained the waters. Before long, hunting packs of sharks appeared, forcing the crew to stay clear of the lagoon's waters.

With the bow secured, Cisneros led the gigapedes down the gangplank, one by one, to forage in the lush undergrowth of the island. Once on the beach, Cisneros detached the tethers from the fat, brass eyelets inset along the flared rims of the indigo carapaces. The twelve-foot-long creatures needed little encouragement. Their many legs churning across the sand and into the green, their voracious appetites leading them on. Up the beach, Cisneros saw Diego standing near Balderas.

"That was quite a performance you gave. I half believed you'd have shot me as well," Cisneros said to Diego's back. When no response came, Cisneros asked, "Having second thoughts?"

"Hell no, Orlando. The bastard deserved worse than what I gave him," he answered without turning. "He's mutinied before. Seven years back, on an Andenken ship. That one turned ugly. Very ugly. One of our capitans owed him some gambling debt or other – probably other – which is how he came under the *Brazos* banner."

"Where did you hear this?" Cisneros asked in surprise. "I've done three tours with Balderas, and never even heard that whispered."

"I check on every crewman before we sail, Orlando," Diego said, turning. "I know that Miguel Torres spends his pay on whores the moment he arrives in port, but spends his time in the arms of men. I know that Zarzamora has six children by five different women on three different worlds. I know that Angel Del Hoyo sang tenor with the *Salida del Sol* Company on Cyodne before a jealous lover cut his throat and ruined his voice. I make it a point to know all there is to know about the crew I sail with, Orlando."

"You never cease to amaze me, my friend," Cisneros said finally. "But allow me to offer some advice: you *could* find better ways to endear yourself to the crew."

"I'm not here to be their friend, Orlando. Ancira was their friend, and it didn't keep him alive. And I'm not Ancira. No, fear and loathing will work just fine for my purposes." "And just what are your purposes?"

Diego picked up a shell and flung it out across the water. It skipped twice before sinking. "How are they? Your gigapedes?"

"Oh. They're in good shape, considering," Cisneros said, accepting the change in

subject. "The rough ride didn't bother them as much as I'd feared, but we ran them pretty hard there at the end when they were expecting to curl up in their boxes of sawdust and hibernate six weeks."

"So are they able to run the dynamos?"

"Absolutely. A few days of forage and they'll be boiling over with energy," Cisneros said. "Shipmaestro Menendez shouldn't need them before then, I believe. Speaking of, here he comes now. Something's wrong."

Menendez puffed up the beach toward them, shirtless, his belly and breasts flopping with each step. His left arm was red and swollen to twice its normal size, with an ugly purple splotch on the back of the wrist. His fingers were so swollen they looked like they'd fused into a flipper. "We've got a problem," he panted.

"Your arm," said Diego.

"This? No. I just stuck it where it didn't belong. *Araña del seda* got me. Had a cocoon of eggs between a rib and a gas vent. Nice one, too. Big as my fist. Well, not that I can make a fist now, but you get the idea," Menendez said. "Not the first time one's bit me. Hurts like hell. It'll get worse before it gets better, but the arm should be fine in a week or so."

"Then what," asked Diego in puzzlement, "is the problem, if not your arm?"

"Well, the repairs are mostly straightforward. I've got crewmen up top hooking the ripped hull back together, then slathering the edges with crushed gigapede eggs. That's drawing out *arañas del seda* from every nook and cranny. They're spinning like crazy, stitching the rips closed faster than our men can work," Menendez said. "Even where there's sections of the hull completely gone, we've got more than enough canvas to close the gap –"

"The canvas," Diego interrupted. "How much do we have?"

"Plenty. We have more than enough for repairs."

"Do we have enough extra to put together, say, an extra gas cell?"

"I suppose. If we wanted to. But that brings us back to the big problem," Menendez said. "We don't have any hammered goldskin."

"Hammered goldskin?"

Menendez nodded. "Lost a lot of it. A heck of a lot. Some of it burned away, even. *Arañas* can stitch the cells back together, but not even *araña* thread is airtight. Without hammered goldskin to line the inner cell... It doesn't matter how many extra cells we stitch together. Unless they're lined with hammered goldskin to hold in the *hidrógeno*, *La*

Riaza would make the Cielo Mar, but she'll lose lift by the time we made Ansuly."

"So? Get some more goldskin," snapped Diego.

"But Señor Brazos," said Menendez, "there are no cattle here."

"Señor Menendez, listen to yourself. You're talking about the lining of cow guts as if they're spun gold. There is nothing magical about cow guts. You need airtight lining? Then make do with something else."

"But –"

"No buts. I want *La Riaza* airworthy again, and I want that extra gas cell. I expect results, Menendez, not excuses," said Diego. "Those sharks out there in that lagoon – you might start with them. Damn things should have plenty of guts to spare."

With that, Diego marched down the beach to the airship, leaving two exasperated officers in his wake.

Cielo Mar

The new gas cell, an ungainly, triangular thing, tugged forcefully at the stern of *La Riaza*, where a dozen ropes held it firm. The crew began calling it *Riaza Pequeña*, or *Riaza Loco* when the officers weren't around.

On the sixth day, with Cibola's orange crescent cutting a swath across the cloud-speckled sky, *La Riaza* cast off. With full gas cells and little cargo, the ship climbed like an emerald streak into the sky, trailing *Riaza Pequeña* behind. The gigapedes raced along their drums, the connected drive shafts powering the props with a fury.

Unlike the week before, *La Riaza* cut into the rippling, unstable slipstream without incident. The pilothouse windows fogged instantly in the frigid air. Blue sky turned violet.

"Deploy masts," ordered Diego. "Raise sail."

A mast peeled away from the hull, rising perpendicular to the bow. Another followed on the opposite side. The short-handed crew struggled to crank two masts out at the same time, instead of the standard four. Once locked into place, two more masts rose, making pairs. Around the bow they worked, until all sixteen masts spread like araña legs from the bow, a naked umbrella. Up the rigging they climbed then, held safe by lifelines, loosing the wedges of sail and drawing them up tight between the masts.

Their breath fogged the air. Their sweat froze against their skin. Frost settled along the leading edge of the masts.

"And now," said Diego softly in the pilothouse, "Cielo Mar takes us."

The dorsal sails filled. *La Riaza* lurched forward, rising rapidly. In rapid succession, the lower sails filled until the ring of canvas strained against the masts. The airship groaned from stem to stern as the current whipped it away from Marlino – already the watery world curved away beneath them. Then Marlino was no longer beneath them, but behind.

Pebbles lifted off the floor. Forgotten shards of glass and splinters. The signal whistles drifted about on the ends of their chains. The pilothouse crew anchored themselves, slipping a foot under the leather straps fastened to the floor. They had shed all weight, leaving it behind on Marlino.

In the black sky, stars gleamed faintly, their light overwhelmed by the immense glow of Cibola. Here and there, brighter points shone boldly – the evil red of Ary and Asay, green Cydone, the forbidding white of Vra.

"Antonio, the watch is yours," Diego said finally. "Maintain course and heading. I'm going to the capitan's stateroom. I'll be...displeased if I'm disturbed."

He slipped his foot from the strap, then floated up to the ceiling. With a gentle push, he vanished through the stairwell.

No one noticed when Diego emerged from the stateroom. He floated in the shadows of the crew's quarters, the largest room on the ship. Crewmen floated in mid-air, perched on the ceiling or sat in their hammocks with the tiedowns fastened to keep them from drifting. They laughed and sang bawdy songs, and gambled in corners where the officers pretended not to see. Most wore their coats and gloves, but some floated barefoot and shirtless. The room's heating coils glowed feebly, but with so many bodies packed in close, it was almost warm.

The lamplights blazed merrily. Now that *La Riaza* sailed the Cielo Mar, the gigapedes had gone into their boxes of sawdust and the driveshafts disengaged from the nacelles. Now it was the relentless currents of wind outside that spun the props, powering the dynamos.

Cisneros shook his head, wagging a finger at DeLuna, who held onto a wall strap with his good arm. "That, my young friend, is where you're wrong. Diego Brazos may be guilty of many sins, but rashness is not one of them."

"How can you defend him like you do?" DeLuna demanded. "You've seen how he is, the demands he puts on the crew."

"Yes, I've seen him. And I've seen him like this before. Never quite to this

extreme, granted. But still, this is the way he responds to any challenge," Cisneros said. "His mind, it is always ten steps ahead of everyone else. He is always planning, always thinking. That's why smart men never gamble with him. I learned my lesson there years ago. But there's nobody else I trust more. He rewards loyalty with the same, and is a man of his word."

"If that's so," demanded DeLuna, "then's why is he so...ruthless toward everyone? We're not mutinous."

Cisneros sighed. "When he's dealing with Brazos Company business, it's best to think of his heart as a piece of flint. Hard, cold and sharp enough to cut. Get him out from under the shadows of the big ships, and he's almost human again."

"But why?"

"His brothers, I think," Cisneros said. "They compete, always, to out-do one another. Impress their fath –"

Diego pushed himself forward. The singing stopped.

DeLuna glanced worriedly at Cisneros, who was staring at Diego, frowning.

"No, no. No, no. Don't stop on my account," he said, slurring the edges of his words. He lifted a bottle of the capitan's metheglin to his lips and drank deeply. With his other hand, he tossed three other bottles toward the crew. The bottles drifted lazily until caught – those catching bottles glanced uneasily at Diego, unsure of what to do. Cisneros and Menendez exchanged worried looks. "Drink up. Go ahead. I won't shoot you. Not during the celebration, at any rate."

"What are we celebrating?" asked Cisneros.

"Why, the downfall of Nueces, of course!" Diego shouted, prompting an even more confused murmur from the crew. "Right, right. None of you know. Let's take a few steps back. How many here believe the tale that any ship to sail with hidrógeno in its belly is a doomed ship, never to sail again?"

The crew stared in silence.

Cisneros drifted toward Diego. "Maybe you should sleep it –"

"Damn gutless cowards," Diego snarled, pulling out a flintlock and pointing it at various random crewmen. "Who believes it? I mean, damn, *really* believes it?"

A few hands went up. When those crewmen weren't shot, most of the rest followed.

"That's more like it," Diego said, satisfied.

"Well, I'm here to tell you that you idiots are absolutely correct. *La Riaza* is going to burn, burn, burn. She's going to burn Ferdinand Nueces' empire down around that buitre's

ears. If he wanted *La Rianza's* cargo so bad, we'll just deliver it to him personally."

"But...Nueces doesn't have any trade posts on Ansuly," said Zarzamora.

Diego swung the flintlock toward Zarzamora. "Clever man! Which explains why we're not going to Ansuly. We sail for Cydone!"

The crew erupted in protest.

"I know, I know," said Diego, waving the flintlock menacingly with one hand and taking another swallow of metheglin with the other. "Thirteen weeks instead of six. Thirteen weeks of frozen piss and frostbite. But we've got the meat of twenty sharks in the galley, so there's plenty to eat." He laughed, then abruptly turned grim. "This isn't about you. I don't give a rat's arse how much you hate me, as long as you follow orders. Nueces crossed the line once, he'll do it again. The Brazos Company does *not* play tit for tat. We will send Nueces to hell, with *La Rianza* lighting the way."

DeLuna turned to Cisneros.

"Ten steps, my friend," whispered Cisneros, tapping his clasped forefingers to his lips. "Ten steps."

Disproportionate Response

Rio Latón meandered beneath *La Rianza*, the chocolate waters wandering across the tree-studded savannah in a braided channel. The trees flanking the riverbed cast long shadows as the sun dipped to the horizon behind the airship. Diego watched the miles slip away beneath them, along with an occasional barge. His gut churned. The hour of truth was at hand.

"Ciudad Coruna, right ahead," DeLuna

announced. He offered Diego the spyglass with his off hand. He'd regained the use of it as his shoulder healed during the voyage, but strength had not returned. DeLuna's future as a pilot was limited.

Diego waved the spyglass away. He could see the red walls of Ciudad Coruna well enough, sprawling along the river's course. Instead, he leaned out the open windscreen, bracing himself against the stowed tarp. The warm air felt better than a woman's lips after the past months spent in the Cielo Mar. A scattered herd of cattle passed beneath. Then a tumbledown cottage. Then plowed cropland. Diego took the final swallow from his last bottle of metheglin, then flung the bottle down at a caravan snaking along a dusty road below.

"There's still time to change your mind," Cisneros said from the stair.

Diego turned, giving him a humorless smile. Diego nudged his wheel, edging *La Rianza's* pitch up a fraction. *Rianza Pequeña*, towed behind, kept lifting the stern despite full ballast tanks. "Where's the fun in that? Orlando, you know me better. Besides, what would the crew think? To come all this way to back out now?"

"The crew are choking on their fear," said Cisneros dryly.

"This is good. A frightened crew is an obedient crew. Don't you agree, Antonio?"

"Hard to say," answered DeLuna. "I'm pretty much scared pissless myself."

La Rianza crossed over the city's western wall, barely a hundred feet up. The wall was not as impressive from above as from a distance. The imposing wall was a simple timber palisade with a clay brick façade

with guard turrets every few hundred feet. A handful of black-bearded guards in silver armor gawked at the green-striped *La Rianza* with her strange, towed balloon. People on the streets looked up as the airship passed overhead. Their simple confusion would not last. The city owed much to the air trade. News of the foreign airship would spread quickly. But not quickly enough.

"The men are assembled, then?" Diego asked. "Everything is prepared?"

"Awaiting your orders, *Capitan*," Cisneros said, pointed emphasis on the title.

Diego reached inside his vest and pulled out a bag, tossing it to Cisneros. "Pearls. Distribute six per airman, twelve to each officer. They'll buy passage to Puerta Lamer. Or help with bribes. Whichever."

Cisneros nodded, then glanced out the window. "The river's turning. We'll be at Fortaleza Nueces in minutes. If you have any sins to confess to Cibola, now would be a good time."

Rio Latón made a wide bend southward, and the bulk of Ciudad Coruna followed the river. Where the river curved back on itself, at the narrowest point, was Fortaleza Nueces. Covering several hundred acres, the protected dockyards boasted walls twice as high the city palisade. Cavernous hangars and warehouses filled the grounds, enormous buildings clustered together at the center of the compound, surrounded by broad, grassy landing fields dotted with mooring towers.

"We're getting crosswind from the north-east, *Capitan*," DeLuna said.

"How strong?"

"It's gusty, but not that strong."

"Then lock your wheel, Pilot, and report with the rest of the crew."

DeLuna locked his wheel and scrambled up the stair from the pilothouse. Diego waited another minute, watching the walls of Fortaleza Nueces grow closer. He could see airships now, at least three – two bows splashed with crimson sunbursts settled inside hangars, another in the open field either freshly landed or readying for takeoff. Beyond the landing fields was the Great House, the mansion home of Ferdinand Nueces. A tempting target.

"No, not today, Ferdinand. I will not take your house. I will content myself with taking everything else." Diego spun his wheel to pitch *La Rianza's* bow down, locked it, then scrambled after DeLuna.

The catwalk, slippery and stinking of fish, trembled as the airship nosed down. The squeaking drive shafts echoed through the



interior of *La Riaza* as the gigapedes raced along their drums in the prophouse. Diego glanced up the ladder, spotting the glint of violet. Anchored as they were, they'd run themselves to death if given the chance.

That chance would never come.

Diego climbed past the ballast tanks and empty aft holds, into the uppermost stern. Menendez stood there, holding an axe. The remaining airmen and officers – all eleven of them – crowded together on the final segment of catwalk, stooping beneath the control wires, struts and timbers of the rudder assembly. The canvas hull flapped loosely about them.

Diego pulled a pistol from his belt. He laid it against the wet planks of the catwalk. He fired.

The oil on the catwalk blossomed into flame. The fire spilled along the walkway, disappearing a behind the curve of the aftmost gas cells.

"So, Shipmaestro," said Diego, "now we get to see if this work you've been bragging about has been worth all of our blood and sweat."

"Ha!" Menendez snorted. "I said from the start we'd all die on this mad contraption of yours." He shrugged. "Beats burning to death."

"Then the order is given," said Diego. "Abandon ship."

Menendez swung the axe at the nearest strut to port. It splintered, and the catwalk sagged. Arañas, disturbed by the blow, scattered from their hidey-holes amongst the timbers. "Hold tight, mates. This is going to get a mite rough." He swung at the starboard strut. It gave under the blow, and the catwalk section – men and all – dropped from *La Riaza*.

Their fall stopped with a violent jerk. Ropes bound the catwalk to *Pequeña Riaza*. One slack loop caught Zarzamora's right arm as it snapped taut, severing the arm at the elbow. Torres lost his grip and fell, screaming.

The makeshift gondola wobbled pendulously beneath *Pequeña Riaza*. The wood creaked and cracked. They began to sink.

La Riaza blundered onward. The keel of the airship flickered, illuminated like a paper lantern. The glow spread steadily up from the keel into the body of the ship, and forward to the bow.

In the compound, ground crews ran like panicked ants. *La Riaza* nosed into the nearest hangar. The dorsal masts ripped free from the ship. The hangar roof collapsed.

La Riaza foundered forward into a warehouse. The wooden walls broke inward, the

roof crushing onto *La Riaza's* bow. Abruptly, the interior of the bow flared intensely. The hull peeled away as ash. Clean, white flame reached out across the airship. Fire leapt onto the warehouse. *La Riaza* sagged, then dropped her burning stern onto the hangar.

The whale oil exploded. Flaming barrels soared through the air, shattering against the other hangars. Streams of fire lanced out, splashing against warehouses and ground crews alike. Wagon masters whipped their teams, trying to escape the firestorm. The wagons, heavy with trade goods, were too slow. They became rolling infernos, spreading chaos to corners of Fortaleza Nueces beyond the reach of the exploding airship.

Pequeña Riaza, pressed by the gusty northeastern breeze, drifted beyond the compound wall, settling into Ciudad Coruna proper with a rough thud.

"Everyone off at the same time," shouted Menendez. "Any laggards'll get themselves a tour of Coruna from the air."

They leapt off as one, except for the unconscious Zarzamora, hopelessly tangled in the rigging. Relieved of its burden, *Pequeña Riaza* leapt skyward.

"Maybe he's better off," said Cisneros, watching the balloon climb with its prone passenger. "He wouldn't get far on his own. Not with that arm. This might give him a good enough head start."

"Aye. If he doesn't roll off and fall to his death first," said Diego.

The narrow streets were filling with the curious and the concerned. Already, cinders and sparks from the firestorm were falling on the buildings nearest the wall. Many were beginning to smolder.

"Time to scatter, men," said Menendez. "A dirty group like us is begging for attention. We'll drink a beer together in Puerta Lamer. Or better yet, Ansuly. Cibola be with you."

The men scattered through the growing crowds, leaving only Diego and Cisneros.

"You know, Diego," Cisneros said as the roof of the building closest to them erupted into a full-blown blaze, "all things considered, I never want to serve under your command again."

"All things considered, Orlando," said Diego, coughing in the thickening smoke, "I'd rather I never command again."

High above, gently illuminated by the burning city below, *Pequeña Riaza* climbed higher every second, leaving behind the fires and the smoke and the troubles of the world below. ■

TOMES OF THE DEAD THE WORDS OF THEIR ROARING

By Matthew Smith

TOMES of the DEAD
THE WORDS OF THEIR
ROARING

Matthew Smith

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Rachel Swirsky is a fiction MFA student at the Iowa Writers Workshop and a graduate of Clarion West 2005. Her short fiction has appeared in markets including *Subterranean*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Escape Pod* and the pirate-themed anthology *Fast Ships, Black Sails*. 'Heartstrung' is the first short story that she ever finished with the sense that it was ready to go out in the world, and she's pleased that it's found such a beautiful forum.



Doug Sirois: 'Heartstrung' is filled with many emotions and symbols. For me as illustrator, I was most interested in conveying as much of the emotion and symbolism as I could in one image, but my main concern was portraying the contrast of emotion between the two characters.

HEARTSTRUNG by RACHEL SWIRSKY illustrated by DOUGLAS A. SIROIS

One, two, three, the needle swoops. Pamela squirms as the needle cuts into her sensitive heart tissue. "It hurts!"

"Shh," the seamstress says. "It's almost done, honey. Just a few more stitches and you'll be like mommy."

The seamstress bends forward as she presses her needle into her daughter's heart for another stitch, squinting to make sure she sews tight and even. As she pulls the thread taut, she realizes this stitch marks the midpoint – she's now halfway finished sewing Pamela's heart onto her sleeve.

Just yesterday, Pamela's heart lay locked beneath her ribs like a treasure. Then her daddy decided it was time for her to grow up, and now Pamela's heart lies red against the cuff of her pale blue sweater, bright as a cardinal in the summer sky. When the seamstress finishes sewing it on, Pamela will become a woman.

Right now, though, she's just a little girl. The seamstress tries to distract her. "Aren't you excited about the ceremony?"

"Will Beth be there?" asks Pamela. She's asked this question several times in the past few days. The seamstress plays along anyway.

"Beth will be there and so will Uncle Jake and Aunt Mattie," she says. "Everyone's coming for you. So you have to be good now so you won't disappoint them."

Pamela nods grudgingly. The vinyl chair she's standing on creaks underfoot. The seamstress puts her hand on the back of

the chair to keep it from sliding across the linoleum.

"Good girl," she says, slipping her hand underneath the cuff as she sews to make sure that none of the stitches go too deep and prick Pamela's wrist. As the needle goes in, she sees Pamela wince anyway. "Remember how lovely Beth looked after she had it done? Remember when Uncle Jake slapped her across the face at her ceremony and her smile lit up like a light bulb and everyone clapped?"

"Will everyone clap for me?"

"Of course they will, if you just stand still."

Mid-stitch, the needle snaps in two. The seamstress glances at the broken pieces in her palm, then tips them into her apron pocket. As she fumbles for a replacement needle, the broken tip catches underneath the heart on her own sleeve, and the seamstress pauses for a moment to shake it loose.

Rubbing her wet eye with a closed fist, Pamela shifts her weight to take advantage of the respite. "It hurts," she repeats. Pamela's fingers dig into her palm. Her knuckles have turned white.

Seeing this, the seamstress feels a twinge of anxiety. The flare of emotion flicks past her eyes, which remain dry, and past her lips, which stay smiling. The anxiety travels through her bloodstream into her arm, down the plaid sleeve of her sweater, and into the heart which is sewn on her own cuff. The heart absorbs it, as it has absorbed all her strong emotions since she

was sewn at thirteen. Only a dull, polite echo of the anxiety remains.

The seamstress grabs a dish towel from the rack next to the kitchen sink and dabs at her forehead, then begins sewing up around the curves. This part is the trickiest, especially since her needle has a tendency to slip in the loose knit weave.

The seamstress knew the cardigan would be difficult to sew on when she picked it, but she bought it anyway because it's both timeless and attractive. It's cut so that the fabric falls close to the skin without revealing too much of the shape underneath, and the knit is a pretty but not intrusive color. It's the kind of sweater that never seems to go out of fashion.

The seamstress is pleased with the choice. The only thing that worries her is the plastic flower-shaped button that clasps the sleeve. Will Pamela think it's childish to have a flower button on her sleeve when she's in high school? When she makes love for the first time? Marries?

The seamstress glances up at Pamela's face. The little girl is surreptitiously trying to wipe a tear away from her eye. Little girls learn to emulate their sewn mothers long before the stitches make it easy, although Pamela hasn't always obeyed the social rules. A memory overlays the scene: Pamela, at age three, screaming "I won't apologize!" after pinching the arm of a boy she saw in line at the movies. When Pamela's father dragged her by the elbow



to the boy's parents, she hurled herself onto the sidewalk. "He's a boy! I won't say I'm sorry!" Her expression was wound up in a red tangle. The tears didn't roll; they detonated one by one like bullets. Her determination not to cry now looks similar.

Remorse spins through the seamstress's mind before vanishing into the heart on her sleeve. Nine years old is so young to be sewn, but it's done younger and younger these days. The seamstress and her husband argued about the timing for weeks, late at night after Pamela had gone to sleep. The seamstress had lain restlessly in bed while they argued, buttoning and unbuttoning the mother-of-pearl clasps on her own sweater. Ultimately, she'd had to concede. Did she want Pamela to be the only girl in her class who hadn't had it done?

The needle swoops. Three stitches left. Two stitches left. One stitch left.

The seamstress tugs on the cuff, examining the heart to make sure none of the stitches are tight enough to pinch or loose enough to come undone.

"Are you done?" asks Pamela.

"I am."

Pamela lifts her sleeve up to her face so she can scrutinize her mother's work more closely. Her surreptitious tears have dried and her fingers have relaxed, leaving faint welts on her palms. Her lips lift upward into a gentle smile – the same smile the seamstress sees on her neighbor's faces, in the expression of the butcher's wife and the grocer's sister, in the mirror.

"Do you feel better now?" the seamstress asks.

"Yes," Pamela says. Her polished smile is as lovely as the recess beneath the summit of a cresting wave.

Another memory emerges: the seamstress was picking Pamela up from school a few years ago. She arrived late and Pamela had spent the time doing gymnastics on the school playground. When Pamela's mother pulled into the circular driveway, Pamela was on the very top of the jungle-gym. When she saw her mother, she leapt down and ran across the playground to her mother's car. Her knees were grass-stained and her chin blotted with dirt. Her grin was both too wide and too full of teeth, one of them crooked, another stained with a smear of strawberry jam.

Pamela will never smile like that again.

The seamstress feels the expected surge of regret – but it doesn't vanish. Surprised, the seamstress pauses to see if it will drain a heartbeat late, but it doesn't. It stings. Her

hands freeze on Pamela's shoulders.

"Should I get dressed now?" Pamela asks.

"Why?" The seamstress stares at Pamela uncomprehendingly. She'd forgotten that regret stings. "The ceremony," she reminds herself. Stiffly, she moves her hands back to her sides. "Yes. Go ahead."

Pamela clings to the back of the chair while she slides down to the floor. Her shoes squeak as she leaves the room and disappears up the stairs.

The seamstress pulls a chair out from the kitchen table and sits down. She doesn't know what to do. Should she call her husband? She probes the edges of the heart on her sleeve to see if it's somehow come loose, but the stitches pull tight and strong. She finds a trickle of blood on her cuff and traces it back to a single loose stitch. Feeling underneath, she discovers the tip of the needle she broke earlier. It must have gotten caught there.

She digs it out and stands to get a new needle and a spool of thread. She needs to sew up her heart before she loses too much blood. The trickle down her sleeve becomes a rivulet in her palm and a drop splashes onto the table. Before long, she'll get dizzy, and her hand will be too unsteady to sew. Best to do it now.

Except, she can't remember the last time she felt regret – at least, felt it long enough for it to settle in her body. The feeling exhausts her, but it also captivates her, salves a craving she hadn't known she possessed. She pulls out the chair and sits again.

Suddenly, the seamstress remembers the last time she felt regret, but the memory is no longer distinct on its own. It's bound up with another memory. The second one took place two years ago, when Pamela was seven. While playing with a tea set she'd received for her birthday, Pamela dropped a cup. All of the cups in the set were painted with roses and embossed with gold around the rim, but this one had been lithographed with Pamela's initials as well, so it was Pamela's favorite.

It was a stormy day. Rain pounded on the windows behind Pamela as she held up the fragments and demanded that they be put back together again.

"I can't. It's broken," said the seamstress.

"I broke it!" wailed Pamela, pushing the two pieces together. She was thinking, no doubt, of the future tea parties that would be ruined by having only three cups for four saucers, but Pamela's distress reminded the seamstress of her own childhood when she'd once left a little shovel and pail on the

beach where they were washed away by the tide. She'd felt as though she'd betrayed them; she'd made them lost and lonely, and how would they ever forgive her?

The seamstress lifted her daughter onto her hip and walked over to the trash so that Pamela could drop the pieces of the cup into the bin. She held up Pamela's hands and examined them to make sure there were no cuts and when she was sure there weren't, she set Pamela down and fetched a broom and dustpan to clean up the rest of the fragments.

"It's okay," the seamstress assured her daughter. "The teacup broke because there was something trapped inside. When the glass was made, a tiny air spirit that flies in the wind crawled into the big oven where they were cooking the sand. 'What's this?' thought the air spirit, and she fell asleep in the oven. When she woke up, she was baked into the teacup. She's been waiting for someone to let her out."

The seamstress didn't know where she'd found that idea; she was only following her fancy. Pamela looked up at her with eyes still half-full of tears. The little girl's expression was skeptical.

"It's true," the seamstress insisted.

"Listen. Can you hear that?"

They listened. Outside, the rain swept droves of leaves onto the deck.

"That's the air spirit playing in the wind. She's so happy to be free that she's knocking on all the branches."

Pamela chewed on a strand of her hair thoughtfully before nodding. "Oh," she said, and went back to playing with the tea set.

The next day, all the cabinets in the kitchen were open and the floor was covered in glass. "I wanted to make sure there were no more air spirits!" Pamela said when her father threatened to spank her. "What have you been telling the child?" the seamstress's husband demanded.

So the seamstress had to explain to Pamela how sometimes stories aren't really true outside, they just feel true inside, and the family bought a new set of dinner dishes.

Pamela's footsteps fall heavily on the stairs. The seamstress pulls her chair back, not wanting to be discovered brooding. Pamela has dressed herself all askew: skirt hitched into her tights, hair tumbling out of her self-made bun.

"How do I look?" Pamela asks, spinning on her heel.

"Beautiful," says the seamstress. "Just let me touch you up."

Pamela's eyes light on the blood spilling

down her mother's hand. "Mom!"

"It's all right, honey," the seamstress says, watching her daughter's alarm drain out of her eyes and into her sleeve. "I cut myself while I was making dinner. I'll take care of it."

She wraps her arm in a dish towel and sets about straightening her daughter's clothes and pinning up her curls. Wearily, she considers what will happen at the ceremony. She pictures her husband slapping Pamela across the face, and Pamela still smiling, the same bland, perfect smile that all the women wear, and suddenly she can't imagine going.

She smooths the shoulders of Pamela's dress. "Go back upstairs and wait for your father to come home, honey. He'll take you to the ceremony. I'm not going."

Pamela frowns. "But Aunt Mattie will be there and you bought a new dress and everything."

"I know, but I'm not going."

The seamstress braces herself for a temper tantrum, but there isn't one. A tangle of anger and confusion crosses Pamela's face, then her heart pumps and it drains. Her lips curve upward into a placid smile. Without another word, she turns toward the stairs.

"You know you can talk to me," the seamstress says, haltingly, "if there's anything you want to talk about."

"Like what?"

The seamstress tries to foment her regret into words. They fail to come. "Just...things."

"Okay, Mom." Without a pause, Pamela waves and leaves. The seamstress chuckles shallowly and feels the heart on her sleeve contract like a clenched fist.

She sinks back into her seat and thuds her elbows onto the table, bowing her head into the bowl of her hands. The heart on her cuff has swollen, red and round as a pomegranate.

With regret heavy in her blood, the seamstress realizes so many things she should have done. She should have told her husband no and spared Pamela for a few more years, even though she knows the little girl would have hated her for not letting her 'grow up' like her peers. She should have run away with Pamela into the woods and caught trout bare-handed and built a hut out of sticks. But now it's too late: there's no way to bring Pamela's emotions back without cutting her loose from her heart and starving her body of blood.

A brief fantasy enters the seamstress's mind like a hallucination: she imagines snatching the heart off her sleeve. In her head, the stitches rip free with an immense

roar. She imagines slicing open her chest cavity and using the bathroom mirror as a guide while she reattaches her heart to the veins and arteries that have fluttered loose all these years. She knows she would bleed to death long before she could even get to the bathroom.

It's then that the seamstress realizes the end of the air spirit's story. After so long baked in glass, the little thing could never have flown away. When she tried, she would have discovered that her feathers were brittle and broken.

The seamstress listens to the traffic outside. Her husband will be home soon. She feels light-headed. She doesn't know how to judge how much blood she's lost. It looks like a lot, but how much more blood does her body contain? If her husband comes home in time, he might try to rush her to the hospital and save her life, but she's tired of being baked into glass.

Her fingers converge at her throat and unclasp the long row of buttons that line the front of her sweater. She parts the cloth around her neck and pulls it open to her rib cage, her belly, her waist. She pushes the sleeves away from her shoulders. Against pale skin that hasn't been bare for over twenty years, the lukewarm air of the kitchen is shocking, like a swab of alcohol applied to a wound.

Carefully, the seamstress pulls her arm out of the right sleeve. Her heart throbs on the left one, just above the neatly folded cuff. Then the seamstress slides her arm out of that sleeve too. Her elbow slips free, her wrist, her knuckles. The cloth is slack between her fingers. She drops it. Her heart sinks to the floor.

As her blood stagnates in her veins, emotions waft into her brain like mosquitoes rising from a still pool. Each faint tinge feels strong in the body long denied. Fear and desire undulate through her brain, unpleasant and fascinating before she passes out and they slide into oblivion.

In a few minutes, Pamela will hear her father pulling into the driveway and scamper down the stairs in her fancy dress, and yes, she will be the one to find the body. When she sees her mother slumped over the table-top like a statue, she'll feel only a twinge of grief. The emotion will flare and drain away. She will take her father's arm and accompany him to the ceremony. And when he slaps her across the face, she will smile and politely receive her applause.

Outside, rain will knock on the branches, and she will ignore it. Like a grown up. ▣

PAX BRITANNIA UNNATURAL HISTORY

By Jonathan Green

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Steven Francis Murphy is a resident of North Kansas City, Missouri. A lifelong Missourian, he served during the Persian Gulf War in the US Army's 1st Infantry Division and later served an additional year in the Republic of Korea. He earned his Master of Arts in European History and Gender Studies at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. 'Tearing Down Tuesday' is his debut story.



Doug Sirois: I think we can all relate to this image in some way. The loss of a friend or pet. I had fun designing the robot and expression of emotion in the boy.

TEARING DOWN TUESDAY by STEVEN FRANCIS MURPHY illustrated by DOUGLAS A. SIROIS

With a string of catfish in one hand and his fishing pole in the other, Kyle reached Audrey Young's property as the noonday sun bore down upon him. He had taken the long way home from the Circeville Reservoir, moving like a thief from one scrap of shade to the next, adding almost a half hour to his journey.

Damn, Kyle thought, wiping the sweat away. Apart from a lone crow and a distant speck of silver he took for a dirigible, almost nothing moved across land or sky. Except him, of course, hot footing it across the gravel of Ketchum Road to the next patch of shade at the edge of Audrey's place.

The teenager left Ketchum Road for the long gravel drive that led past seven wind turbines turning round with the hot southern wind, only three of which provided any power. An errant power cable on the nearest tower clanged against the metal struts. None of them had been hooked to the local grid for years, not since Audrey appropriated them under the Communion Salvage Law.

He would have stayed in the relative cool of the ditch but the GM razorbrush and snagglethorn that made their home there were sure to slice you long, wide and deep.

Audrey will have me out here cutting that down again, Kyle thought. *I just cut it down last week.*

His feet were burning by the time he reached the white plywood sign:

THE TINKERIN' WOMAN'S SHOP. AUDREY

YOUNG, OWNER. I'LL FIX ANYTHING.

A pair of Komatsu Construction robots, Saturday in white and Sunday in black, labored to erect another addition to the photovoltaic collectors which sprouted up on the opposite side of the drive. Kyle passed by as Saturday detached Sunday's post hole digger. He could hear Audrey's power washer at work behind the two story high barn which had once been whitewashed but was now sun bleached and peeling in decay. *There's another project I'll get drafted into*, he thought.

"Hey guys," Kyle said. "Where's Tuesday? He didn't meet me at the Reservoir this morning like he said he would."

The two robots looked at each other for a moment, then faced Kyle. They replied in stereo: "Tuesday's up in the Tinkerin' Shop."

Kyle frowned. "Audrey got him working on something?"

Another pause, followed by a twin reply: "Perhaps you'd better see for yourself."

He stepped out of another Day of the Week's way. Thursday rattled down the drive with a stack of photovoltaic tiles piled high above his head. Kyle asked the palsied robot if he had seen Tuesday.

"N-n-no," Thursday stuttered, "Ka-kah-Kyle."

Kyle shrugged and pushed on. When he reached the barn's garage door, he found a trail of fresh mud led him through to The Tinkerin' Woman's Shop. He stepped inside and set his fishing pole aside. He

didn't notice when it fell down behind him.

Big dollops and smears of mud snaked past his old blue dirt bike, which sat at the foot of the stairs. Kyle followed the trail around a workbench full of salvaged electrics. Fans and radios, illegal AC units, kitchen appliances, a dead flatscreen TV with a single bullet hole in the screen. A duck and scurry under bundles of wire and cable took him to the robot stables where everyone except Friday and Wednesday was kept.

The mud led to Tuesday's stall.

He peered inside.

Kyle dropped his catfish when he found Tuesday's muddy head on the floor. The lower half of the green and yellow robot, a quad runner, rested next to the guts of Tuesday's hydrogen hybrid drive. One of his dismembered claws clutched a moss-covered pine branch.

"Tuesday, what happened?" Kyle cradled Tuesday's head in his arms and carried it out to a garden hose coiled up at one corner of the barn.

Once there, the icy cold spring water soaked his denim cutoffs. It matched the chill in his gut. He pulled a stubborn clump of pond mud out of Tuesday's softball sized, lemon yellow cortex socket, which also doubled as his eye. The bot's scratched and faded forest green head sported a number of dents along with the logo of the defunct John Deere Tractor & Robotics Company.

"Hi, Kyle," Tuesday said.



"Tell me what happened, Tuesday."

"Oh, Audrey's tearing me down so she can get the mud and water out. I think she's out back with Friday right now if you are looking for her."

Kyle scooped more mud out of Tuesday's cortex socket. "How did you end up in the water in the first place? You were going to meet me at the Reservoir this morning."

"I forgot," Tuesday replied.

"Like hell Tuesday forgot," Audrey Young said with an unlit meerschaum pipe clenched between her teeth. She worked on one of the other Days of the Week with a battered DeWalt power washer. "Friday, roll forward just a notch."

"Affirmative," the demilitarized automated combat tank said, rolling forward on eight wheels across the concrete wash rack until Audrey patted the desert-tan hull, a signal to stop. She crawled under the wheel well, fishing for something.

"But that's what Tuesday said," Kyle replied. He hunched his shoulders forward. Kyle's mom ran off the day his father got killed and Tuesday was his only friend for the most part. Sure, Audrey let him bunk down in a hayloft above the Tinkerin' Shop, a project Tuesday helped with, but she never seemed happy about it.

Then again, Audrey never seems happy about anything, Kyle reflected.

"Robots aren't supposed to lie, or forget. But Tuesday's gotten pretty good at one, the other, or both lately," Audrey's voice echoed from underneath the tank. "Friday, where'd you find your friend?"

"The John Deere Farmerbot Model Eight-Oh-Five was recovered at grid coordinates –"

"Shit, never mind. Never can get a straight answer, sorry piece of..." Audrey's voice trailed off into a string of pungent mutterings. She tossed a clump of roots out before she continued. "Friday had to go underwater, down into Mike Snyder's pond, to dredge Tuesday out. Not exactly what it was designed for. Speaking of which, weren't you going over there to fish this morning?"

Mike Snyder liked to put Kyle to work when he caught him fishing in his pond. Said it was good for him though Kyle didn't agree. "No. Tuesday said they were really biting up at the Circeville Town Reservoir. So I walked up there and sure enough, they were. He was going to meet me."

Audrey stood up on her toes, deep inside of Friday, her voice muffled by the robot's armored hull. "God damn it, Friday.

What did you drive through?"

"What's wrong with Tuesday?" Kyle asked, worried.

"Restate your query," Friday said, confused between the two humans and their questions.

Audrey pulled, tugged, yanked, then screamed. "Fuck!" Kyle jumped out of the way of a dislodged pine branch that was hurled in his direction. Audrey emerged, an ugly gash on her hand.

"Do you want me to get the first aid kit?" Kyle asked. He tried to contain his urge to laugh at Audrey's bug-eyed rage. The half empty bottle of McCormick's on the ground told him that would be a big mistake.

Audrey didn't beat him near as much as his father had, but she could be provoked with a mere chuckle just the same.

"No! Shut up, damn it! What did you drive through, Friday?" Audrey asked as she pulled out the larger needles and splinters.

"The Farmerbot was wedged within a decaying mass of conifers four meters below surface level. It was incompatible with mission parameters to avoid the submerged obstacle," Friday said.

He'd caught a glimpse of Tuesday, peering in with his lemon cortex, the front half of the sphere recording every detail

That explains the needles, Kyle thought. He got roped into helping Mike Snyder dump their old Christmas tree into the pond every January. There would be quite a tangle of them down there by now, but it gave the catfish a place to lay low and grow fat in the summertime. Perfect with a side of fried onions and green tomatoes.

"Couldn't park itself on the railroad tracks again, could it? Oh, fuck no! Always has to try something new," Audrey complained, waving her wounded hand up and down. "Damned, fickle piece of shit!"

"He went on the tracks again?" Kyle asked, the chill seeping back into his gut.

"Never you mind," Audrey replied as she sprayed water over her wound. It didn't look so bad once the blood and dirt cleared away. Audrey was as tough as they came, tougher than most men in Circeville and everyone knew it. Those that didn't usually learned the hard way.

"Can you fix him?" Kyle asked.

"Fix him? Kyle, I'm going to sell him," Audrey replied. She patted the battle tank's hull. "All right, Friday. Head back down to Pierson's and get that stump pulled out and tell him I'm sorry I had to drag you away

from that. I'll cut him a discount for the time he's lost."

"Affirmative," Friday replied. The forty-ton, eight-wheeled veteran rolled down the drive past Audrey's small farmhouse before turning down Ketchum Road.

"Sell him?" Kyle hollered. "You can't sell Tuesday!"

"And why not? Tuesday isn't pulling its load anymore and I've got a business to run."

"I'll buy him," Kyle said, surprising himself.

This merely prompted a sarcastic chuckle from Audrey. "Is that so? You'll buy Tuesday, will you? On your wages? Boy, you're lucky I don't charge you rent."

With some effort, Kyle stood tall and put his hands on his hips. "How much do you want for him?"

"I'd ask for a thousand, but since you are attached to him and all, I'll let Tuesday go for seven hundred." Audrey produced a pouch of weed, packed her meerschaum pipe, lit it with a careworn Zippo and took a deep hit.

Kyle slumped. "But that's not –"

"Fair?" Audrey's tone had mellowed from

the hard bark of earlier. "No, it isn't. But Tuesday is costing me more money than it makes. It needs to pull its own weight, just like the other Days of the Week. Just look at the time I've lost cleaning Friday up, and I've still got to tear down Tuesday and put that piece of crap back together again."

"But Wednesday can't plow a straight line and Thursday's always dropping things," Kyle said, "and you aren't selling *them*."

"They don't throw themselves in front of trains or into ponds, either," Audrey said. She collected a five-pound sledge from the wet concrete.

"I'll get the seven hundred," Kyle said.

"Better get it by next Sunday," Audrey took a longer hit. The tension flowed out of her body, leaving a slack mass of old muscle clad in a worn pair of bib overalls. "Captain Reed will be dropping by to pick up the engine she wanted overhauled and she is definitely interested in Tuesday."

"Next Sunday," Kyle repeated to himself. That was when the solar dirigible, the *Midwest Drifter*, would make her monthly visit to Circeville, weather notwithstanding. If Captain Reed bought Tuesday, Kyle could forget about ever seeing him again. "I'll get

your money, Audrey," he said.

There was a loud crash out front.

"Damn it, Thursday," Audrey muttered. She stalked away brandishing the sledge and with murder in her eyes.

Seven hundred, Kyle thought. *Where am I going to get that kind of money before Sunday?*

Kyle pedaled down Ketchum Road on the bicycle Tuesday had helped him build from salvaged parts on his eighth birthday. At seventeen, Kyle was getting to be a bit big for the bike and the chain liked to slip off the gears. He left for work early as usual, in case he had to stop for repairs, as usual, and took the quick route to Circeville.

Which led past his old home.

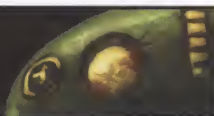
It was still a few days before the Fourth of July, but the early afternoon was filled with fireworks popping off over by the Piersons' place. Kyle gazed with electric longing in that direction before telling himself to quit it. Rebecca Pierson was as fine a girl as they came but she didn't like him anymore than any of the other kids in Circeville. And Mr Pierson made it a point

A gutted H-2 Hummer sat on concrete cinder blocks next to a rusty Lincoln Navigator. His father used to talk about restoring them to working order and driving around town in them. A pipe dream, since there was virtually no gas to be had for them. Petroleum was a government asset these days, no one else's.

Most of the windows were busted and someone had come by to rip the garage door out, which left a dark, mildewed, wet hole in the house, like a gaping, slimy mouth. He imagined that if he went inside, just next to the basement window by the water heater, he'd still see the bloodstain where his father had fallen. The rat-eared couch with tobacco-brown foam would be there, nasty even before the house fell victim to the coons and squirrels.

My fault, Kyle reminded himself. It was all his fault. Everyone in town said so, except for Tuesday, the Sheriff and maybe Audrey, though she didn't talk about the incident at all.

Kyle thought about exploring the grounds by the basement window. He'd caught a glimpse of Tuesday, peering in



to keep her away from Kyle, said he was a little pervert, not that Rebecca or anyone else needed any discouragement. Kyle was narrow-shouldered, thin and pimpled except in the summer time when the sun burned the acne off and bleached his brown hair a honey blond. He shoved the dreamy image of Rebecca's smile away.

The bike chain slipped free from the gears. "Just great," Kyle sighed. He came to a stop in front of his old home, an abandoned ranch style house from the turn of the last century. Home, or it had been once upon a time. That was what they said in those kindergarten stories, once upon a time. *Too bad that didn't have a happy ending*, he thought. With his back to the house, he gathered up the chain and sorted out the kinks.

Nobody would live in the house after Sheriff McMasters shot Kyle's father. His mother disappeared that same day, after screaming at the top of her lungs that it was all Kyle's fault.

A collapsed roof was the latest indignity to afflict the mustard yellow home. Waist high grass and out of control razorbrush was well entrenched in the front yard.

with his lemon cortex, the front half of the sphere recording every detail. *Maybe the tire tracks are still there*. His father had hired Tuesday from Audrey to do some work in the fields. But with the chain restored to normal, Kyle decided against the idea.

There is a sign where Kyle works in Circeville and here is what it says:

THE DRY HOLE BAR AND GRILL. ANDREW LEROY, OWNER. DRY BEFORE FIVE AND WET UNTIL LAST CALL. WHENEVER THAT IS.

Kyle thought it was a good thing that the Grill was dry before five because God was the main course at the Circeville Baptist Club's monthly luncheon, with chicken fried steaks as the Lord's Bounty. For spiritual sustenance the table of old men and women had none other than Traveling Reverend Caldwell J. Robinson, a thin man with long, delicate fingers and a definite air of cold showers and floggings to him. He was in town for the Fourth of July Prayer Revival, which everyone celebrated even though the United States of America had long since faded into the history books with the Ascension of the Solar Communion.

So much toilet paper, Kyle thought as he watched the Bible Club pore over their texts. The people who read it cherry picked what they wanted from the religious tome and ignored the rest. He didn't have much use for it or the Christians and the feeling was mutual.

The Dry Hole Grill was a waitress short so Leroy had pressed Kyle into service for the rest of the week, serving plates when he wasn't doing his busboy work. His tips were a little better, but not by much.

The Reverend wore a woolen pinstripe frock coat and pristine white starched shirt. He smiled at his hosts when he held up one of the famous Robinson Christian Orphanage Dolls. His hosts responded with coos and clucks, along with promises to buy them all at the charity auction later that night. A large wicker basket sat on a chair next to the Reverend, filled with the burlap and yarn rag dolls, made by the orphans themselves.

"The money helps every little bit, but sometimes –" the Reverend's eyes locked onto Kyle – "children need love more than anything else."

The womenfolk muttered that the Reverend spoke the truth.

"Son?" Reverend Robinson smiled and snapped his long fingers at Kyle.

Kyle knew it wasn't a good idea to ignore the Reverend, no matter what his gut feeling was about him. He didn't want the Holy Rollers of the Circeville Baptist Church upset with him. Years on they still loved to wag their tongues over his father's death. They agreed with his mom on where the blame fell and didn't care much for the fact that Kyle didn't go to Sunday School either. Never mind the first class fit they'd have if he did turn up and sit down next to one of their precious grandkids.

"Yes, Reverend?" Kyle asked. He stood just out of arms' reach. The Reverend was pretty grabby and Kyle didn't care for it one bit.

"Come here, son. I won't bite," Robinson said. He stood up. "You look like you need a hug."

No, no, no, I don't need a hug, or want one. Kyle could feel the eyes of the Baptist Club watching to see what he would do. He wanted to run out the back door. Instead, he let the preacher embrace him and found that the man smelled like his father's lavender aftershave.

Robinson had none of Kyle's awkwardness and reserve. His arms snaked around the teenager like tentacles and pulled him in close and tight, rocking him from side

to side. "The Lord suffers the little children unto him. All of them, without favor." He held Kyle at arms' length after the hug and smiled. "Not so bad now, was it?"

Kyle kept his mouth shut, for fear of making a bad situation worse. He wanted nothing more than to scour himself with a fresh bar of pumice soap until he was raw to the bone.

"When will you be moving on, Reverend?" Mrs Hall asked. The retired fourth grade teacher wore a threadbare, orange floral sundress that had seen better days and was meant for a woman forty years younger.

Kyle thought his former school teacher smelled like pig shit dipped in talcum. He tried to avoid her as well, thankful that he could go to make water whenever he wanted now that he was out of her classroom. The Circeville High School teacher let him go to the water closet whenever he wanted so long as he took a pass. It was easier without the other kids in the closet with him. They were liable to try and shove Kyle's head into a toilet or start some other mischief.

"Could we all have some lemonade, son?" the Reverend asked.

"Yes, Reverend," Kyle said. *Any excuse to get away.*

"Hold on a second, there." The Reverend dug around in his pocket until he found what he wanted. He leaned forward and put the coin into Kyle's front pocket. "Why don't you get yourself a glass as well." Reverend Robinson winked and nodded at Kyle then turned back to Mrs Hall. "Beg your pardon, ma'am. Did you say something?"

"Kyle?" she said, peering through a worn out pair of smart specs. "I do believe you are blushing. He blushes a lot, Reverend. Such a strange little boy, had a very troubled life. It is good that a man like you pays attention to him. A robot and that woman are not the best parents."

Kyle knew Mrs Hall secretly referred to Audrey Young as 'that Godless rug muncher', which he thought was a bit much. Audrey lived alone, had for years. *At least Audrey isn't in to little boys and girls,* he thought.

"The Lord forgives you, Kyle. Nobody is perfect," the Reverend said, which caused chuckles and laughter from the Christians.

Kyle shrank away from them, in search of lemonade.

.....
"Did you fall into Mike's pond too?"

Tuesday asked when a soaked Kyle stepped up to The Tinkerin' Woman's Shop. The evening sun fell below the silhouetted solar

tiles and wind turbines. Tuesday's oily silver hydraulic components gleamed in the tangerine twilight.

Thank God Tuesday's back, Kyle thought. Well, almost. "No," he said. "I went swimming like I always do when it is hot. You know that, Tuesday?"

"Someone's telling the truth for once," Audrey muttered. The smell of weed was strong inside the workshop. Kyle stayed just outside where the air was hot and dry, but fresh.

"I jumped in as well," Tuesday said.

"You can't jump, fool." Audrey kicked one of Tuesday's balding tires. She polished a stubborn spot of rust on Tuesday's detached left arm.

"What did you do that for, Tuesday?" Kyle asked.

"Because I - "

Audrey interrupted. "Shut up about that. What did I tell you?"

"But he wants to tell me," Kyle said.

"You don't want to know," Audrey replied. "Laura Snyder brought over some pork chops and fried green tomatoes. Go get into some dry clothes, wash up and eat. I'll

four coins out. The gold coins of the Solar Communion of Ascended Intelligences sported the dove and olive branch on one side, with a map of the Earth on the other. One at a time, he dropped them into a mason jar.

"Twenty-five," he said. A plop.

"Fifty." Another plop.

"Seventy-five." A clink this time.

"One hundred." A final thunk.

Kyle shivered. *Jesus, I've never seen that much money before in one place.*

They were all from Reverend Robinson, four weeks average pay and only six hundred more to go. They always followed the hugs, which lasted longer than Kyle cared for. Suddenly, saving Tuesday seemed doable and a great deal more difficult at the same time. It made his stomach ache.

He didn't eat dinner that night, even though fried green tomatoes and onions were his favorite.

.....
In the Friday afternoon humidity, Kyle dove head first off the limestone ledge into the rock quarry that served as the Circeville Reservoir. Bubbling water embraced and

Tuesday didn't say anything as they pulled over in front of the Circeville Airfield. The Midwest Drifter was due in that evening

be over in a minute or two."

"But - "

Audrey looked up at Kyle. Her grey face was slack, the wrinkles around her forehead loose. "Kyle," she said, her voice low, almost inaudible. "Look, you're a good kid. Someday...well, just go eat. Okay?"

"Okay," Kyle replied. He resolved to find out what was bugging Tuesday later.

.....
He kicked the smashed fragments of a maglev train set out of his way when he reached the top of the stairs. There was a jumble of clothes both clean and dirty strewn about the floor and his unmade bed. On the west wall of the loft around the window were a couple of posters for apprenticeships in the Ministry of Transportation. A gleaming dirigible surfed the clouds in one while young boys and girls pointed with looks of envy. The other poster featured the planned but never built transcon maglev. The post-Singularity transitional government just didn't have the funds for it and Communion didn't concern itself with such things.

After he found some clean clothes, he dug into his soaked trousers and pulled

cleansed his poisons away while he pulled himself deeper, beyond the reach of filtered streams of sunlight. His ears squealed under pressure until his lungs burned.

Kyle popped to the surface before his ears gave way, trying to make his mind a blank slate. He exhaled, driving back the Reverend's remembered pinches after each hug. He rubbed at his forehead in an attempt to wipe the final traces Reverend Robinson's kiss away. His fingers still stank of pig blood, the result of getting roped into helping Mike Snyder butcher a pig for the Fourth of July pig roast that morning. After Mike had put the pig down he made Kyle slice the animal's throat open, and it was easy to imagine the Reverend under the blade, too easy.

The touchy, grabby, always hugging Reverend was forever whispering words of faith and fidelity to the Lord into the ears of his flock, Mrs Hall especially. But into Kyle's ears, he whispered, *You're a source of sore temptation, boy.* The Reverend's coin, the Tuesday saving tithe, would then be slipped into Kyle's front pocket, or as of yesterday, into his waistband.

Another deep breath and he went head

first straight down without a care for the rumored nests of water moccasins that were fruitful in the bottomless pool. He couldn't swim anywhere else without getting into a fight, so the Reservoir was his only choice.

Better this way, he thought. Alone. Away from everyone, just as it has always been.

He liked to imagine that down there in the black ink there was a gateway to a place where no one knew him or cared about his past. Before he could ponder this whimsy any further his ears squeaked and gurgled, forcing him back to the surface again.

When Kyle surfaced lightning flared off to the west, followed by the rumble of approaching thunder. The sickness was still lodged in his gut; it hadn't gone away like it had with previous swims that week.

Just another couple of days is all I need, Kyle thought. I can bear him for that long, right? He climbed out past the rusted NO SWIMMING sign as it started to rain. For Tuesday, he resolved, do it for Tuesday.

It was still raining on Saturday morning when Tuesday asked Kyle if he wanted a ride into work, just like old times. When

turds didn't help much either."

After a moment, Tuesday said, "I miss Flash."

"Really?" Kyle was surprised. "Audrey says bots don't have human feelings."

"She might be right after a fashion, depending on the class of AI," Tuesday said. "But we've got feelings of our own kind. I admired the simple pleasure Flash took out of everything. I wished I was more like him. Simple, not self aware, Turing compliant and such."

"Turing what?" Kyle asked.

Tuesday shook his metal head. "Never mind. I'm going to miss these things."

"Stop it. I'll get the money." *Hell*, Kyle thought, *the dirty old Reverend is throwing money at me.*

Tuesday continued: "And there will be plenty of things I won't miss."

Whatever is eating him is my fault. Kyle felt a panic. "Like what?"

Tuesday didn't say anything as they pulled over in front of the Circeville Airfield. *The Midwest Drifter* was due in that evening, weather permitting. Kyle hopped off Tuesday's back and walked around to

he was younger, Kyle was the envy of every kid in Circeville. They had to ride animals or bicycles to school while Kyle got to ride on a machine, a talking robot no less.

"You know –" Tuesday slowed down "– I still feel bad about your first bicycle lesson. Do you remember?"

"Building the bike or catching my neck on that fence wire?" Kyle laughed. "I remember it all, Tuesday. I was screaming, 'Where are the brakes?' and you hollered back, 'I don't ride bicycles, so how would I know?' It was pretty sad."

"I tried to catch up with you, but you were going faster down the hill and I've never done well on hills. Too top heavy."

"But Flash caught up," Kyle said. He hadn't thought about Flash since he died last year of old age. The German shepherd/coyote half breed's wooden marker was by the barn door where he liked to sun himself.

It was the only time Kyle had seen Audrey cry.

"Yes he did," Tuesday said. "I believe he licked you until you got up. I didn't know canines had healing powers."

"Well, his licking my face made it hard to breathe," Kyle said. "Laying in one of his

face him. The robot's single yellow orb gazed off at the mooring tower. Down in the pit of his stomach, Kyle worried that Tuesday might want to forget about him. He tapped on the battered green shell. "What would you want to forget, Tuesday?"

Tuesday looked down on Kyle and put a claw upon the teenager's shoulder. "Humans forget things when they grow old, especially if it hurts them badly enough. I wish I was like that."

"Maybe we can fix that, or Audrey can. When I get the money, I'll pay her to make the bad things go away."

"I know you'll try," Tuesday said.

Kyle wondered what that was supposed to mean.

"Hop on," Tuesday said. "You'll be late for work."

"You wouldn't want to forget about me, would you?" Kyle asked as he climbed onto Tuesday's improvised seat behind the upper torso.

"Kyle –" Tuesday spun his bald tires in the mud for a bit until they climbed back onto the highway "– you're what has made the last eleven years worth it."

Relieved, Kyle hugged Tuesday even

though he told himself he was too old to do so.

Kyle ducked into the men's water closet at The Dry Hole Grill after serving Reverend Robinson the Saturday special, meatloaf and potatoes.

He wasn't alone long.

The door creaked open behind him, followed by the click of a lock falling into place. Another creak came from the wooden toilet stall door before a tall, warm mass settled behind him. It smelled of aftershave, meatloaf gravy and foul breath. An oily sense of repugnance and self loathing washed over Kyle as he struggled to make water over the urinal.

The Reverend embraced him from behind.

Oh God. He felt ill when the Reverend rested his chin on top of his head. The teenager's swollen member made it impossible to make water, in spite of a full bladder.

"Do you pray, son?" the Reverend whispered into Kyle's ear. His hand slipped down to Kyle's penis. He grasped it, then stroked it. His hand was dry, like leather. It tingled and Kyle rose in response in spite of himself.

Tuesday, do it for Tuesday. Kyle swallowed, sniffed and nodded. It was a lie and it was all he could do not to break down and sob.

"When you are done with work this afternoon, come to my hotel room and pray with me," the Reverend said. Robinson reached into his pocket and placed a gold Communion piece on the top of the urinal.

Kyle was two hundred and seventy-five short of Audrey's price. He'd learned that the money came from donations and the charity auction held by the Circeville Baptist Club the other night for those cheap orphanage rag dolls.

"Did you hear me, son?" the Reverend asked. "You know you need this."

"Umm..." Kyle swallowed again. "I don't think..."

"If you help me with my problem, I think the Lord –" the Reverend placed another coin on top of the first one "– will help you with yours."

"Please..." *Maybe Audrey will cut me a deal. I have most of the money.*

Kyle tried to shake the Reverend loose. To his surprise, Robinson let go and took a step back. "If you don't help me, I'll buy Tuesday myself. Sell him for parts."

Kyle felt a little bit of himself curl up and die inside. He felt like he was trapped in a combine, pulled deeper into the machine.



He wanted nothing more than to struggle free and run for it.

There was a click, then Kyle's eyes fell upon the reflected light of a straight razor, just a hair's breadth from his penis. "It'll be our secret."

A whimper slipped past Kyle's quivering lips. "I understand."

"Don't disappoint me, young man," the Reverend said. With a flick of the wrist, the blade and the Reverend vanished out of the water closet.

Kyle vomited his meatloaf into the urinal.

The Circeville Motel Six had seen better days. Sure, it sported a full array of photovoltaic roof tiles, courtesy of Audrey Young's workshop, along with a fresh coat of paint applied by those Days of the Week that had either arms or sprayer attachments. But the asphalt parking lot had reverted to gravel in patches. Some of the horse posts and wooden bicycle racks leaned over at drunken angles. Mud and road apples filled a dozen potholes which drew the attention of giant buzzing mosquitos.

Kyle hesitated. The rain had eased off some, but the sky was still heavy with grey-blue thunderheads that stretched across emerald fields of corn, hay and soy. The only unnatural sound was the high pitched, electric whine of *The Midwest Drifter's* engines, pushing the dirigible through the air. Like the motel, the ship had seen better days as well. There were grey patches on the rigid air bladder where the photovolt cells used to be. Some of them were still in place, probably not much use under the cloud cover.

The whole town knew Kyle was trying to raise the money to buy the old robot. No one gave him much of a chance, but then they didn't know about the Reverend's tips.

Or maybe they did and weren't going to do anything. *That was how they handled my father*, Kyle told himself. It was all a game, a harmless one to anybody who wasn't forced to play. That is what his father called it, a game. Robinson might call it prayer or meditation or whatever, but Kyle knew he had gotten caught up in the same old game again. The same game that Tuesday had told the town Sheriff about, then showed a video download when the Sheriff refused to believe it.

I could tell the Sheriff, Kyle thought. But he knew people would gossip anyway. When the Sheriff shot his father under the Communion's Summary Law, he very nearly lost his job. Trevor Hackshaw was

a popular man in town, a member of the Circeville Baptist Club, a deacon in the church, pillar of the community and so on. What Trevor Hackshaw did to his son Kyle or the rest of his family wasn't anyone else's business. He read the Bible every day and ignored every word of it with the exception of that bit about sparing the rod and spoiling the child. Mister Trevor Hackshaw was a firm believer in beating the devil out of anyone under his control, especially his dirty, nasty, corrupt children.

I could walk away, Kyle Hackshaw told himself. He looked back toward Circeville and beyond to Audrey's farm over the horizon. *But Tuesday is counting on me*. He took a deep breath and stepped inside.

A ray of sunlight stabbed through the summer storm clouds off to the west, highlighting the Reverend's light brown pubic hair against pale, flaccid skin. Kyle unwrapped himself from the sated adult and slipped into the dingy bathroom with a belly full of seed and a mouthful of hair. He washed his mouth out the best he could and tried to forget the feel of Robinson's

He'll say I lured him into it somehow, took advantage of his being kind to me. That was how Dad always put it.

Reverend Caldwell J. Robinson snored in blissful ignorance of Kyle's ponderings and never heard the straight razor click open.

There was a hell of a lot more blood than he had counted on. The sheets were soaked crimson. The rage and anger was gone, replaced with a numb coldness. He went about the task of cleaning himself up.

It had been easier with the Reverend than with the pig, Kyle thought.

There was a knock at the door. "Hello?" Mrs Hall called, her voice muffled by the inch and a half of wood door between her and Kyle. She rattled the door knob.

An icy chill of shock ran down to Kyle's tailbone. He dropped the motel's courtesy bar of lye soap into the sink. The soap, towels and sink itself were stained a hopeless shade of pink, dappled with clots of red. A look through the peephole revealed Mrs Hall in a black dress, done up in enough make-up to spackle the side of Audrey's barn.

Kyle eased up to the crate, his lower lip trembling, his heart pounding. He took a deep breath and looked inside

fingertips on his face before the man had pushed him down hard, choking him.

When word got out about his father, the bullies took to calling him a pole smoker, a queer, a fag and a dozen other homophobic slurs. Once Kyle learned to stand up for himself the slurs stopped, at least to his face. But the town gossip never ended and Mrs Hall was one of Circeville's worst offenders. It got back to him that Mrs Hall thought he went to the bathroom so much because he was touching himself and trying to corrupt the other little fourth grade boys.

Kyle spat once, twice, then a last time before he crept back into the room. A wave of nausea welled up inside before he willed it back down. The gold coins for Tuesday sat on the rickety bed stand, more than enough to free the ailing robot. Next to the money was the Reverend's straight razor.

I've got what I came here for, all I have to do is walk out and it will be over.

Kyle picked up the ivory handled, cool steel instrument. White-hot rage replaced the sickness in the pit of his stomach.

No it won't. Mrs Hall will blab about it. Somehow she'll find out. The Reverend might tell her just to torture me some more.

This creep would fuck a hole in the wall, Kyle thought. He wondered if the town knew about the affair.

Another knock. "Reverend? I've brought you dinner."

"Shit," Kyle said under his breath. He looked at the open window and grabbed his clothes. The rain had returned, with lightning that illuminated the trees outside of the Motel Six.

He just about had his denim cutoffs on when there was a third knock at the door. "Are you in there, Reverend Robinson?"

Kyle left the water running, scooped up his money and slipped out the window into the thunderstorm. Five long, hard strides carried him to the tree line and onward to save Tuesday.

The rain washed most of the blood from him as Kyle ran through the fields between Circeville and The Tinkerin' Woman's Shop. A single light inside the barn showed him the trail home.

He found Friday out front hitched to an empty trailer. Saturday stood on Friday's right with his twin, Sunday, on the left.

"Audrey?" Kyle shouted. *Where is she?*

He saw the blue and white Ford paint job of Wednesday, the automated, full sized tractorbot with the 1940s rounded retro style body that was in vogue at the start of the 21st Century. Thursday, the Bobcat brand bot with a similar build to Tuesday, tried to steady his rattling arms, which jangled in accompaniment to the crickets and frogs. Monday, the deep blue police bot, was visible as a silhouette against the light spill from the barn shop. His red eye strobed back and forth across Kyle. He nodded.

"Where's Tuesday?" Kyle asked, out of breath. None of the bots answered. He went into the Tinkerin' Woman's Shop.

It was cool and damp inside the barn where a single light on the slow spinning ceiling fan illuminated an open wooden crate stenciled for *The Midwest Drifter*. A single green claw stuck out of the middle of the crate.

Kyle eased up to the crate, his lower lip trembling, his heart pounding away in his chest. He took a deep breath and looked inside.

He found Tuesday's battered head

Woman knelt down beside Kyle. "Tuesday wanted you to have this."

Kyle could see a patch of yellow between the folds. "What is that?"

Audrey tried to take Kyle's hands but the teenager batted them away. She sighed. "Do you know what Tuesday said to me after he saved you from your father?"

Kyle hugged himself tighter.

"He said, 'Make it go away, Audrey.'"

She reached forward and put a hand on Kyle's shoulders. "He could see the blood from your hand print like it was yesterday." Audrey unwrapped the sphere. She pointed at a spot on the orb. "Right about here. I scrubbed this spot over and over again, but Tuesday said he could still see the blood, the crusty hand print. It never went away."

"Why didn't you leave him alone?"

"I tried to help."

"You can't leave nothing alone."

"Tuesday was trying to commit suicide.

Why else do you think he tossed himself into the lake or played chicken with trains? None of the other bots do that. Sooner or later he was going to get someone hurt in the process, maybe even you."

surrounded by carefully tagged components. The quantum cortex socket, his eye and his soul, was empty, the lemon cortex missing. Tuesday's other arm was coiled around the robot's upper torso. Coiled loops of internal wiring filled half of the crate.

Kyle fell to the ground and curled up on himself to cry.

Audrey stepped out of the shadows. "Where were you, Kyle?" she asked, her voice tender, low. "We waited up for you as long as we could."

Kyle sniffed. "I've got your money. Put him back together."

"Kyle..." Audrey shook her head. "Son, I can't."

"No, seriously." Kyle dug into his pocket and threw the gold coins of the Solar Communion on the dirty floor. "I've got your money. The rest is upstairs. Put him back together."

"It's not what Tuesday wants, Kyle." She walked over to her workbench, retrieved a rag-wrapped sphere and crossed back over to Kyle. "I can put him back together, but Tuesday won't be happy. He hasn't been happy in a long time." The Tinkerin'

"Bullshit," Kyle said. *It's all crap now.*

"He was old and he couldn't take it anymore. Every memory is five minutes ago to a robot with a quantum class memory core. You may as well have etched it into a marble headstone." Audrey took Kyle's hands and placed Tuesday in them. "They have these redundant shadow files called memory ghosts and..."

Kyle took hold of his friend and polished the spot where he had placed his bloody hand eleven years ago. The blood had welled up around his thumb from within his father's chest. They never talked about that night at Kyle's house.

"So you tried to fix him," Kyle said. He still didn't want to believe it. Not after what he had done. *I killed a man, for God sakes.*

"He never stayed fixed. It was like trying to do brain surgery with a chainsaw. I was a kid when they stopped making things like Tuesday. I didn't stand a chance with salvaged Pentium X processors. It would be like trying to teach a dog how to write."

"What is Captain Reed going to do with him?"

Audrey shrugged. "Use him for parts, I figure. She has a bot similar to Tuesday on

the *Drifter*."

Kyle stared at Tuesday as he polished the surface. It was a cold dead weight with a glass sheen. Within the yellow haze, he imagined he could see ghost images of Tuesday's past. The good times, the bad times, and the time before Kyle met the robot.

Audrey pulled a scrap of paper from her bib overalls. "If a robot could love...well, I think he loved you very much, Kyle. He left this." When he ignored her, she set the note down next to him. She got up and went inside for the night.

Kyle stayed with Tuesday till the Sunday dawn.

That Sunday morning, Kyle collected his money and a few things, then went down to the airfield to purchase a one way ticket to anywhere but Circeville. All around him, people talked about the ghastly murder in town of the Reverend Caldwell Jeremiah Robinson, founder of the Robinson Christian Charity Orphanages. Word had gotten around that the good man of the Lord wasn't quite so pure as one might have thought. The Sheriff had found pictures of nude children, lots of them, with the Reverend's belongings.

"I heard one of his orphans might have got him," one passenger said as Kyle made his way to his assigned cabin, very grateful to be unnoticed for once.

"Whatever for?" a shocked woman nearby asked.

"Taking indecent liberties," came the reply.

"Oh. That's horrible. I never would have guessed."

Kyle found his cabin and slid the door shut behind him. The steward told him there would be no one with him until Lexington at the earliest, which suited him just fine.

He hadn't left Audrey a note. He didn't see any reason to.

Kyle opened Tuesday's note instead.

Be well, Kyle. And grow strong.

Later that morning, Kyle watched the Missouri River pass beneath the *Drifter*. In the traffic channel below, a robot dredge scoured away at the muddy river bottom, carving a path for the grain longboats and barges that would soon come downstream at harvest time.

He took a deep breath and leaned over the window ledge with Tuesday's soul in his hands. Then he set him free. ■

Abiding with Sturgeon:

HARLAN ELLISON®

Mistral in the Bijou

It is unlikely that I could have worshipped him more, the day he came to live with me, had his knock on my door been accompanied by thunder and roses. Let us get this clear between us, right from the git-go: I admired Ted Sturgeon more than words can codify. Not just the writing, but much of the man. Not just the art and craft, but the flawed, weird duck who schlepped them.

We both smoked pipes, but Ted tamped his bowl full of a *grape* flavored tobacco so sweetly and sickly redolent it could stun a police dog. I was a little over thirty-five years old when Sturgeon came to live with me. Ted was just fluttering his wings around age fifty.

Herewith, the (by actual count) eleventh time I have started to write down this remembrance of the iconic H. Hunter Theodore Waldo Sturgeon, simply a Great Writer of Our Time. In preparation for this day – one I had foolishly hoped would never come – I have worried this exercise as would a pit bull with an intruder. But now it's here, and now I have dawdled and postponed and evaded to the point where I got put in the hospital for a couple of days. Evaded? As would the helot duck the knout! Ten times before I sat down here, put my two typing fingers on the keyboard of the stout Olympia manual office machine (that Ted sometimes usurped when he was here), and ten times I had said awfuckit and torn out the paper. Ten times. Now eleven. And everyone is screaming at me for my seemingly dilatory behavior.

And here's the flat of it, friends.

And Ted would understand.

Most of what I know about Ted Sturgeon, I cannot tell you.

A PAUSE, IF YOU'LL INDULGE ME. I NEVER did drugs. Probably because I was on the road at an early age and saw what it could do to the creative process. But Ted did stuff, and I have neither the inclination nor the information to comment on what effect it had on him. But what I wanted to tell you was a sweet little moment tangential to the whole substance thing, and it was this:

Ted and I were at a party thrown by a brilliant young poet named Paul Robbins; something like 1967. Everybody was toked and somebody passed me a doob the size of a stegosaurus coprolith, and I passed it on to Ted, sitting next to me. And, naturally, some yotz, whose paranoid orientation conned him into a sense of an ill wind blowing in the room, snarked at me, "Whassamatter, you don't want a hit?" And before I could tell him to mind his own, Ted said (in that lovely tenor), "Harlan won't use till he comes down."

I coulda kissed him. And years later, Ted, commenting on how my stories could seem so hallucinatory when I'd never done drugs, told an interviewer, "Harlan is the only person I know who produces psilocybin in his bloodstream." Coulda kissed him again. (We'll encounter the first time Ted said that, a bit later in this herky-jerky hegira to the altar of an author.)

Uh, for the record, Ted and I never kissed.

Although two men kissing is just fine, just fine. Just saying.

THIS WILL NOT BE A WELL-INTENTIONED and elegant *homage* and it sure as hell isn't going to be a *noblesse oblige* accommodation.

It will no doubt upset the faithful, dismay the shy, and outrage the punctilious. Complaints; oh yes, there will be complaints. I get a lot of complaints about my manner.

Yeah, well, if Ted or I had ever given much of a foof about the penalties pursuant to living our lives by our own manner, we sure as hell wouldn't have behaved the way we did, and still do.

But it's the eleventh attempt to climb this Nanga Parbat, in for a penny is in for a pound, either I do it or I don't. Had I my druthers, I wouldn't. But since Ted called me before he died to say he wanted *me* to do his obit...

SINCE WE'RE IN IT TOGETHER AT THIS point, let me pause again to reprint some words. This is what I wrote for *Locus* an hour and a half after Ted died. It was on the first page of that 'journal of record' of the science fiction world, June 1985, issue #293 if you care to check.

It began raining in Los Angeles tonight at almost precisely the minute Ted Sturgeon died in Eugene, Oregon. Edward Hamilton Waldo would have cackled at the cosmic silliness of it; but I didn't. It got to me; tonight, May 8th, 1985.

It had been raining for an hour, and the phone rang. Jayne Sturgeon said, "Ted left us an hour ago, at 7:59."

I'd been expecting it, of course, because I'd talked to him – as well as he could gasp out a conversation with the fibrosis stealing his breath – early in March, long distance to Haiku, Maui, Hawaii. Ted had written his last story for me, for the *Medea* project; and we'd sent him the signature plates for the limited edition. He said to me, "I want you to write the eulogy."

I didn't care to think about that. I said, "Don't be a pain in the ass, Ted. You'll outlive us all." Yeah, well, he *will*, on the page; but he knew he was dying, and he said it again, and insisted on my promise. So I promised him I'd do it, and a couple of weeks ago I came home late one night to find a message on my answering machine: it was Ted, and he'd come home, too. Come home to Oregon to die, and he was calling to say goodbye. It was only a few words, huskily spoken, each syllable taking it out of him, and he gave me his love, and he reminded me of my promise; and then he was gone.

Now I have to say important words, extracted from a rush of colliding emotions. About a writer and a man who loomed large, whose faintest touch remains on everyone he ever met, whose talent was greater than the vessel in which it was carried, whose work influenced at least two generations of the best young writers, and whose brilliance remains as a reminder that this poor genre of dreams and delusions can be literature.

Like a very few writers, his life was as

great a work of artistic creation as the stories. He was no myth, he was a legend. Where he walked, the ether was disturbed by his passage.

For some he was the unicorn in the garden; for others he was a profligate who'd had ten hot years as the best writer in the country, regardless of categorizations (even the categorization that condemned him to the ghetto); for young writers he was an icon; for the old hands who'd lived through stages of his unruly life he was an unfulfilled promise. Don't snap at me for saying this: he liked the truth, and he wouldn't care to be remembered sans limp and warts and the hideous smell of that damned grape-scented pipe tobacco he smoked.

But who the hell needs the truth when the loss is still so painful? Maybe you're right: maybe we shouldn't speak of that.

It's only been an hour and a half since Jayne called, as I write this, and my promise to Ted makes me feel like the mommy who has to clean up her kid's messy room. I called CBS radio, and I called the *Herald-Examiner*, and that will go a ways toward getting him the hail-and-farewell I think he wanted, even though I know some headline writer will say SCI-FI WRITER STURGEON DEAD AT 67.

And the kid on the night desk at the newspaper took the basics – Ted's age, his real name, the seven kids, all that – and then he said, "Well, can you tell me what he was known for? Did he win any awards?" And I got crazy. I said, with an anger I'd never expected to feel, "Listen, sonny, he's only gone about an hour and a half, and he was as good as you get at this writing thing, and no one who ever read *The Dreaming Jewels* or *More Than Human* or *Without Sorcery* got away clean because he could squeeze your heart till your life ached, and he was one of the best writers of the last half a century, and the tragedy of his passing is that *you* don't know who the fuck he was!"

And then I hung up on him. Because I was angry at his ignorance, but I was *really* angry at Ted's taking off like that, and I'm angry that I'm trying to write this when I don't know what to write, and I'm furious as hell that Ted made me promise to do this unthinkable thing, which is having to write a eulogy for a man who could have written his own, or any other damned thing, better than I or any of the rest of us could do it.

—Harlan Ellison



Theodore Sturgeon and Harlan Ellison at San Francisco Civic Auditorium, 12 February 1977 • photograph © Clay Geerdes

...AND SINCE NOËL WON'T SPILL THE beans in *her* tureen, yet expects *me* to do it – "Get in there and suck up them bullets!" she said sweetly – even though she knows most of what I know – though not even between us can we seem to make the dates properly coincide – at least I have a living witness that what I write here is true. Ted's daughter; she has read this and vetted this.

WHEN I ENCOUNTER THE ENCOMIA OF other writers about Sturgeon, and they gush something like, "I learned so much from him," or "His work taught me how to write," I think they are either fools, or they're lying. No, wait, that's unfair: not lying...deluding themselves; so stunned by what Ted could do seemingly effortlessly, oblivious to what agony accompanied the doing of it, that they've become tropes of what Stephen King noticed about writers, if you leave sour milk open in the refrigerator, pretty soon *everything* in the box takes on the smell.

Yes, he certainly laid down a new architectural elevation every time a story left his nest (onward, madly onward flew the farraginous metaphors); and to be sure, any scribbling idiot can perceive his facility with language, like a pizza chef whirling that expansible crust aloft; and no question that there are glimmers of Ted's auctorial seminar *everywhere* these days; nonetheless, you *cannot* learn to write from Sturgeon

any more conveniently than one could learn how to dance by studying Fred Astaire.

Ted was among the very best there ever were. And the way we're going, he may be among the very best there ever *will* be. He loved the sound of words the way trees love the wind, the way yin loves yang, the way the halves of Velcro love their mate (and Ted often contended that he had 'invented' Velcro in one of his stories). Ted played and sang not only with the guitar, but with words like the best chum you ever had, like dopey kids drunk on the summertime, careering through an empty lot. Words were, to Ted, the best chums possible.

Inspirational, but out of reach. What he did, he did like Blackstone or Houdini, with lock-picks and escape engines from flaw-free fetters under his tongue, in his butt, up his nose. Ted was, in the purest sense of the word, a runesmith. (Yeah, that's the title of the story we wrote together – at least the one you know about – if you want to pause and go read it and come back here... Don't say I'm not considerate of your feelings.)

Anyone who misbelieves that they learned how to write by deconstructing a Sturgeon story – try it with 'A Way of Thinking'; I double-dog-dare you! – is not only building castles in the air, he or she is trying to move furniture *into* it. Sturgeon was what he called me once: *rara avis*. Weird bird, existent in the universe in the number of one.

DO I INTERRUPT MYSELF? VERY WELL then, I interrupt myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.

Here's what Ted wrote in 1967 as introduction to my book of short stories, *I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream*. It goes here, correctly, because it was one of the spurs that moved and shook him to come stay with me.

And as I wrote for Ted's attention in a 1983 reprint of the book, for which I refused any number of Big Name offers to supplant Ted's 1967 essay:

"Ted Sturgeon's dear words were very important to me in 1967 when they were shining new and this collection became the instrument that propelled my work and my career forward. To alter those words, or to solicit a new introduction by someone else, would be to diminish the gift that Ted conferred on me. This book has been in print constantly for sixteen years. Only this need be said: I have learned the proper uses of 'lie' and 'lay,' Ted."

I was in deep anguish in 1967, some of the toughest times of my life; and Ted wrote this:

Introduction

The Mover, the Shaker

My report on Harlan Ellison's *Pain God* in *National Review* evoked the following, from a right-wing gentleman in Pennsylvania:

Harlan Ellison, contrary to the otherwise astute Theodore Sturgeon, is no more a major "prose stylist" than the editorial writer of the *Plumber's Journal* or *The New York Times*. Instead, he stands unchallenged as the god-awfullest writer ever to become submerged in the vaseline of synonyms and antonyms.

What Mr Sturgeon mistakes for "image-making" is merely the slick conundrum of an empty-headed self-lover who, unhappily, believes that the bathroom ritual of personal daily resurrection, when inflated rhetorically, is 14" pegged prose. What emerges is not a "style" but rather a sort of neologistic bawling from the belly. It reminds one of the yips and yaps to be heard in the war councils of imbecilic demonstrators, from Berkley [sic] to Boston.

Ellison's "mad, mixed metaphors" are only less puerile than those of a certain Pennsylvania Supreme Court

Justice, and his "unfinished sentences" no different in construction than those to be found in the diary of a lady golfer or political speech writer suffering from Liberal emphysema.

Four penitentiaries offered courses in creative writing we would soon be inundated with little Harlan Ellison's [the apostrophe also sic], all of them, to be sure, "groovy" and all of them ghastly. His unconcealed hostility toward his betters is evident in nearly everything he has ever written. That he is reviewed in a magazine noted for correct English (and often bad French) will probably embarrass the fellow. It does me.

To which I replied:

I find no hesitation in deepening Mr _____'s embarrassment by demonstrating that he could not possibly have read my review of *Pain God and Other Delusions* with care, which leads inescapably to the deduction that he has not carefully read Ellison. For the tenor, sum and substance of my report was not that Harlan Ellison is a major prose stylist, but that in three to five years he shall be. Further, I did not in the review concede that Ellison is capable of atrociously bad writing – I proclaimed it. I said in effect that this extraordinarily energetic young writer is a man on the move, so watch him. Style, like taste, is resistant to lucid definition; however, both, as living things should be, are subject to constant change. For example, I can clearly recall the time when it was regarded as both stylish and tasteful to capitalize proprietary terms like Vaseline and God (at any degree of awfulness) and hardly tasteful to admit to any expertise on the style of ladies' diaries.

You hold in your hands a truly extraordinary book. Taken individually, each of these stories will afford you that easy-to-take, hard-to-find, very hard-to-accomplish quality of entertainment. Here are strange and lovely bits of bitterness like 'Eyes of Dust' and the unforgettable 'Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes'; phantasmagoric fables like 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream' and 'Delusion for a Dragon Slayer'.

I have something interesting to tell you about that last-mentioned story. Almost

everyone who has been under the influence of a (and Purists please note: I tried) hallucinogen can recognize the 'psychedelic' quality of this story and its images, even to a fine detail like the almost total absence of sound during the shipwreck sequence, and of course the kaleidoscopic changes of persona and symbol. Yet I know for a fact that Harlan has never had this experience, and is one of those who could not be persuaded under any circumstances to undergo it. I got a special insight on this one night at a party when his hostess graciously offered him the opportunity to 'turn on.' "No, thanks," he said. "Not until I come down."

Which would remain a good-humored whimsy but for something a biochemist told me a couple of years ago. It seems that there is a blood fraction which is chemically almost identical with the hallucinogen psilocybin. It's manufactured in the body and like most biochemicals, differs in concentration in the bloodstream from person to person, and in the same person from time to time. And, said my biochemist friend, it is quite possible that there are some people who are born, and live out their lives, with a consciousness more aware, more comprehending, more – well, expanded – than those of the rest of us. He cited especially William Blake, whose extraordinary drawings and writings, over quite a long life, seemed consistently to be reporting on a world rather more comprehensive than one we 'know' he lived in.

There are a great many unusual things about Harlan Ellison and his work – the speed, the scope, the variety. Also the ugliness, the cruelty, the compassion, the anger, the hate. All seem larger than life-size – especially the compassion which, his work seems to say, he hates as something which would consume him if he let it. This is the explanation of the odd likelihood (I don't think it's ever happened, but I think it could) that the beggar who taps you for a dime, and whom I ignore, will get a punch in the mouth from Harlan.

One thing I found fascinating about this particular collection – and it's applicable to the others as well, once you find out – is that the earlier stories, like 'Big Sam', are at first glance more tightly knit, more structured, than the later ones. They have beginnings and middles and endings, and they adhere to their scene and their type, while stories like 'Maggie Moneyeyes' and 'I Have No Mouth' straddle the categories, throw you curves, astonish and amaze. It's

an interesting progression, because most beginners start out formless and slowly learn structure. In Harlan's case, I think he quickly learned structure because within a predictable structure he was safe, he was constrained. When he got big enough, good enough – *confident* enough – he began to write it as it came, let it pour out as his inner needs demanded. It is the confidence of freedom, and the freedom of confidence. He breaks few rules he has not learned first.

(There are exceptions. He is still doing battle with 'lie' and 'lay', and I am beginning to think that for him 'strata' and 'phenomena' will forever be singular.)

Anyway...he is a man on the move, and he is moving fast. He is, on these pages and everywhere else he goes, colorful, intrusive, abrasive, irritating, hilarious, illogical, inconsistent, unpredictable, and one hell of a writer. Watch him.

Theodore Sturgeon
Woodstock, New York
1967



All other photographs of Theodore Sturgeon were taken and supplied to us by Wina Sturgeon (thanks also to Eric Weeks)

"WATCH HIM," HE SAID. THAT WAS THE linchpin of our long and no-bullshit, honest-speaking friendship. We were a lot alike. (Noël's son, age 16, has also read these pages and he declares I'm "a fantastic writer, and arrogant as hell." You just described your grandfather, kiddo.) A lot alike, and we watched each other. Avis to avis, two bright-eyed, cagey, weird birds assaying a long and often anguished observation of each other – Ted, I think, seeing in me where and who he had been – me, for certain, seeing in him where I was bound and who I would be in my later years, which are now. We were foreshadow and *déjà vu*. We were chained to each other, in more a creepy than Iron John way.

I had watched him from afar, before I met him, when I reviewed the just-published *More Than Human* in the May-July 1954 issue #14 of my mimeographed fanzine, *Dimensions*. I was an extremely callow nineteen, Ted was only thirty-six and married to Marion, living back East in Woodstock, I think; Noël still had two years to go before she could get borned.

With all the imbecile *sang froid* of, oh, I'd say, an O-Cel-O sponge mop, I pontificated the following comment on Sturgeon at his most exalted best:

Book reviewers, like Delphic Oracles, are a breed of individuals self-acknowledged to be authorities on everything – including

everything. Thus it is with some feelings of helplessness that a reviewer finds he is totally unprepared or capable in describing a book.

It happens only once in every thousand years or so, and is a greater tribute to any book than a word of praise for each of those years. So enjoy the spectacle, dear reader.

Theodore Sturgeon has expanded his novella 'Baby Is Three' into a tender and deeply moving chronicle of *people*, caught in the maelstrom of forces greater than any or all of them. The book, in case you missed it above, is *More Than Human* and insures the fact that if Ballantine Books were to cease all publication with this volume, their immortality would be assured.

We have dragged out more than we thought we could. Sturgeon is impeccable in this novel. Unquestionably the finest piece of work in the last two years, and the closest approach to literature science fiction has yet produced.

WE WATCHED THE HELL OUT OF EACH other. After we met, if I remember accurately, in the autumn of 1954, I remember taking offense at a remark the late Damon Knight had made about Ted's story 'The Golden Egg' (he opined, the story "starts out gorgeously and develops into sentimental slop"), and Ted just snickered and said, "Damon can show a mean streak sometimes."

Later in life, one day I remembered that and chuckled to myself and thought, "No shit."

Ted called me one time, before he lived here, and sang me the lyrics to 'Thunder and Roses'. I wrote them down, ran them in *Dimensions*, in issue #15, and when next Ted called me, we sang it together. Ted wrote quite a few songs. They were awful, just awful. What I'm trying to vouchsafe here is that in terms of songwriting, both Pindar and Cole Porter felt no need of stirring in their respective graves at the imminence of Sturgeon's lyricism. He was superlative at what he did superlatively, but occasionally even Ted pulled a booger.

Oh, wait a minute, I have just got to tell you this one...

NO, HOLD IT, BEFORE I TELL YOU THAT one – Ted and the guy reading *The Dreaming Jewels* – I've got to tell you *this* one, which Noël just reminded me of, he said ending a sentence with a preposition.

One early evening, I was rearranging a clothes closet, and I unshipped a lot of crap that had been gathering dust on a top shelf. And Ted was just hanging out watching, for no reason (we used to talk books a lot but I don't think on that particular evening he was again driving me crazy in his perseverance, trying to turn on to Eugene Sue's *The Wandering Jew* or *Mysteries of Paris*). And I pulled down this

neat tent that I'd used years before, when I was a spelunker; and Ted got interested in it, and he unzipped and unrolled it, and of a sudden this nut-case says to me, "We should go camp out."

Now, two things you should know, one of which Noël remarked when she remembered this anecdote. "The two *least* Boy Scouts in the world!" And she laughed so hard her cheek hit the CANCEL button on her cell-phone, and that was the end of *that* conversation. (Which is a canard, because I was, in fact, an actual Cub and Boy Scout, WEBELOS and all, with merit badges, when I was a kid, so take *that* Ms Smartass Sturgeon.) And the second thing you should know is that my home, Ellison Wonderland, aka The Lost Aztec Temple of Mars, sits at the edge of two hundred acres of watershed land and riparian vegetation, high in the Santa Monica Mountains, facing what is known as Fossil Ridge – two million year old aquatic dead stuff in the rocks – now part of what the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy has designated Edgar Rice Burroughs Park because the land that Carl Sagan and Leonard Nimoy and I saved from developers is *exactly* where the creator of Tarzan and Barsoom used to have picnics, back in the early 1900s.

Okay, so now you know that, and now you know why this resident nut-case Sturgeon is saying to me, "Let's go and camp out."

Which is – don't ask me why, it *seemed* like a good idea at the time – how I found myself the next night in a tent, outdoors, in the middle of a very humid spring night, with semi-nekkid Sturgeon, eating gypsy stew out of a tin can that fuckin' exPLOded, unevenly dripping, wallpapering the inside of the tent wherein I slept till the mosquitoes and no-see'ems gorged on my flesh and I crawled moaning back to the house at three a.m. ...

HERE'S THE ONE I WAS GOING TO TELL you before I got footnoted:

Ted had a surfeit of hubris. Every *good* writer has it, especially those who scuff toe in dirt and do an aw-shucks-ma it weren't nothin'. (John Clute just calls it "shucksma.") False humility is bullshit or, as Gustave Flaubert put it much more elegantly, "Modesty is a kind of groveling."

But Ted had that scam down pat. He could act as shy as the unicorn in the garden, but inside he was festooned with bunting and firecrackers for his talent. One would have to be in a coma to be as good

as he was, as often as he was, not to revel inwardly at the power. He was selfish and self-involved, even as you and I. He was also generous, great-hearted, and loyal.

Yet in all the analyses I've read, no one seems to have perceived that Ted – who was touted, by me as well as others, as knowing all there was to know about love – was a man in flames. He had loathings and animosities and an elitism than ran deep. He knew genuine anguish. But he also knew more cleverly than anyone else I've ever met, that it was an instant turn-off; if he wanted to get what he wanted, he had to sprinkle dream dust; and so he filtered his frustration and enmity like Sterno through a loaf of pumpernickel, distilling it into a charm that could Svengali a Mennonite into a McCormick Thresher.

From the starting blocks, Ted had been lumbered with the words 'science fiction', and unlike Bierce or Poe or Dunsany, he never got out of the ghetto. Dean Koontz and Steve King know what I'm talking about; and so did Kurt Vonnegut, who created Kilgore Trout, who was Sturgeon. He wanted passionately to get out of the penny-a-word gulag, and he *knew* he was better than most of those who'd miraculously accomplished the trick.

Ted had gotten into writing because he understood all the way to the gristle the truth of that Japanese aphorism *The nail that stands too high will be hammered down*. And while I'm citing clever sources, Ted also got into the writing in resonance to Heinrich Von Kleist's "I write only because I cannot stop."

But he also knew it was a gig. It was a job. Masonry and pig-iron ingots and pulling the plough. Not a lifetime job for guys like Ted and me, weird ducks who'd rather play than labor. A kind of frenetic, always-working laziness. Tardy, imprecise, careless of the feelings of others, obsessed and selfish. He was, I am, it's a fair cop. So he and I have produced enough work to shame a plethora of others, enough to fill more than a dozen big fat *Complete Sturgeons* or *Essential Ellisons*. What no one ever realizes is that it's all the product of guilt and laziness, guilt *because* of the laziness.

We know what we *can* be, but we cannot get out of our own way. Ted was the king of that disclosure. He could not cease being Sturgeon for a moment, and he was chained to the genre that was too small for him.

(Ted once told me, and everyone I have dealt with since has told me I'm full of shit and lying, that he *hated* the title 'A Saucer

of Loneliness' that Horace Gold attached to the story before he'd even finished writing it – because UFOs were "hot" and "sexy" at that time – and that he'd originally wanted to call it just 'Loneliness' and sell it to a mainstream, non-sf market. Apparently he wrote it as a straight character study, couldn't move it – same with 'Hurricane Trio' he said – and did it as Gold had suggested.)

(Had a helluva fight with the brilliant Alan Brennert over titling the story when Alan wrote his teleplay for *The Twilight Zone* on CBS in 1985 when we worked the series together.)

No matter how congenial, how outgoing, how familial, Ted knew way down in the gristle what Hunter Thompson identified as "...the dead end loneliness of a man who makes his own rules." And it made for anguish because he was imprisoned in a literary Coventry, an auctorial penny arcade where there was – and continues to be – such an acceptance of mediocrity that it is as odious as a cultural cringe. And Ted wanted more. Always *more*.

More life, more craft, more acceptance, more love, more of a shot at Posterity. Not to be categorized, seldom to be challenged, just famous enough that even when he wasn't at top-point efficiency everyone was so in awe of him that they were incapable of slapping him around and making him work better. That kind of adulation is death to a writer as incredibly *Only* as was Theodore Sturgeon. He hungered for better, and he deserved better, but he could not get out of his own way, and so...for years and years...

He burned, and he coveted, and he continued decanting those fiery ingots, all the while leading a life as disparate and looney as Munchausen's. He knew love, no argument, but it was the saving transmogrification from fevers and railings against the nature of his received world. And this anecdote I want to relate – as funny as it tells now – was idiomatic of Ted's plight.

Here's what happened.

What we were doing in a Greyhound bus station, damned if I can remember. But there we were, about five of us – I think Bill Dignin was one of the group, and I seem to recall Gordy Dickson, as well. But Ted and I and the rest of these guys were going somewhere chimerical, the sort of venue my Susan likes to refer to as Little Wiggly-On-Mire. And there we sat at a table waiting for our bus, chowing down on grilled cheese and tomato sandwiches, or whatever, and one of the guys nudged Ted

and did a “Pssst,” and indicated a guy at the counter, who was (so help me) reading the Pyramid paperback reissue of Ted’s terrific novel, *The Dreaming Jewels* (under the re-title *The Synthetic Man*). And it just tickled Ted, and he came all a-twinkle, and whispered to us, “Watch this, you’ll love it.”

And Ted got up, sidled over to the dude, slid onto the stool next to him, and, loud enough for us to hear, cozened the guy with the remark, “Whatchu readin’?” and the dude absently flashed the cover, said it was something like a fantasy novel, and Ted said archly, “How can you waste your time reading such crap?”

And we waited for the guy to defend his taste in reading matter to this impertinent buttinsky. We held our breaths waiting for the guy to correct this stranger with lofty praise for what a great writer this Theodore Sturgeon was.

The guy looked down at the book for a scant...

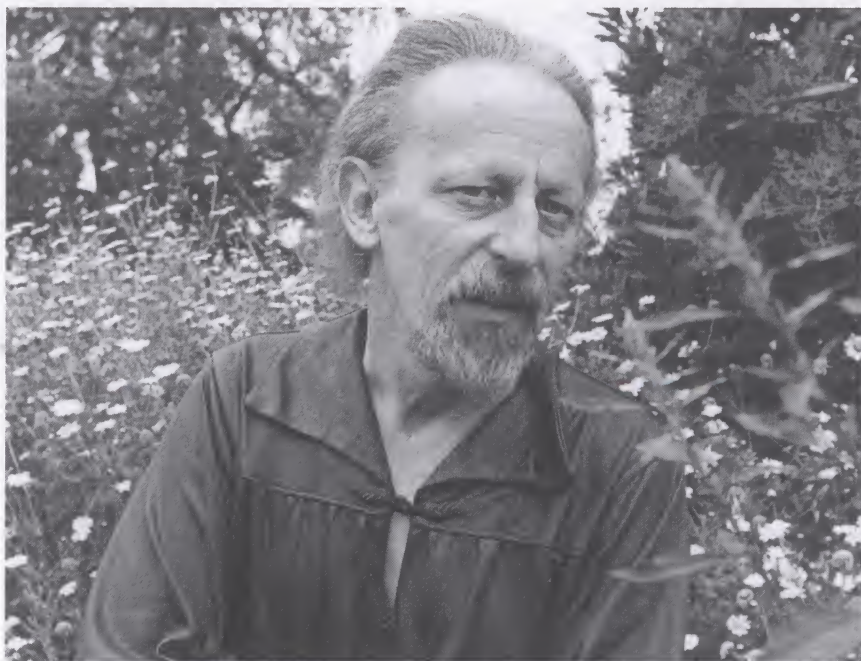
Shrugged, and said, “Y’know, you’re right,” and he flipped it casually across the intervening abyss into the cavernous maw of a huge mound-shaped gray trash container. Then he paid his coffee tab, slid off the stool, and moto-vated out of the Greyhound station.

We knew better than to laugh.

Ted came back; and he had the look of ninth inning strike three. None of us mentioned it again.

It seemed funny at the time. Not so funny when I write about it.

HERE’S A FUNNY ONE. I DON’T HAVE THIS authenticated, that is to say, I (thankfully) have no photos, but I sort of always knew that Ted had an inclination toward, well, not wearing clothes. *Your* doctor would call it nudity. Now, as I say, I don’t know if Ted was a card-carrying *nudist* at any time in his life, but around here he started walking about sans raimant. I could not have that. Not just because we had studio people and other writers and girl friends and the one or two people who made up my ‘staff’ *also* in situ, but mostly because bare, Ted was not any more divine an apparition than are each of you reading this. He had blue shanks, scrawny old guy legs, muscular but ropery; he wasn’t inordinately hairy, but what there was... well... it was *disturbing*; a little pot belly that pooched out, *also* mildly distressing; I will not speak of his naughty bits. But there they were, wagglin’ in the breeze. I am, I know, a middle-class disappointment to



Wina Sturgeon took these photos between 1972–73

Ted’s ghost, that I am thus so hidebound, but I simply could not have it. Particularly, especially, notably after The Incidents:

Primus: he decided to make *paella* for me and a select group of dinner party favorites. So we got him this big *olla*, and amassed for him the noxious ingestibles (did I mention, I only *hate* this olio, would rather have someone hot-glue my tongue to a passing rhino than to partake of *paella*), and off into the kitchen went the naked Sturgeon. A day he took. A whole day. No one went near the kitchen. I sent *out* for my coffee. And here’s what is the Incident aspect of it: as he mishd that mosh, he used his hands, alternately digging into the heating morass and then occasionally *scratching his beard*. I am not, I swear on the graves of my Mom and Dad, not making this up. I have no idea if others in the house saw it, but I did, and I got to tell you, had I not loathed *paella* out of the starting-gate, that tableau from The Great Black Plague would have put me off it at least till the return of the Devonian.

(Another footnote within an anecdote inside a reminiscence: Ted was impeccable. Clean. This was a clean old man I’m talk’n’ here. Not obsessive about it, not some pathological nut washing his hands every seven minutes, but *clean*. So don’t get the idea that the horror! the horror! of the *paella* Incident stemmed from a fear of Sturgeonion uncleanness, it was just straightforward here-is-a-dude-slopping-

his-claws-in-our-dinner-and-then-maybe-skinning-a-squirrel-who’s-to-know.)

(So stop looking at me like that, Marion.)

Secundus: he liked being helpful; little chores; nice short houseguest strokes that won one’s loyalty and affection. Did I mention, Ted used charm the way Joan of Arc used Divine Inspiration. He could sell sandboxes to Arabs. Charm d’boids outta the trees. Devilish weaponry. So: little aids and assists. Such as answering the doorbell every now and then. Which was all good, all fine, except most of the time he forgot he was *bareass nekkid*! Capped as Incident on the afternoon, as god – even though I’m an atheist – is my witness, he answered the door and the Avon cosmetics lady in her Ann Taylor suit and stylish pumps gave a strangled scream, dropped her attaché sample case, her ordering pad, her gloves (I think), and flailed away down the street like a howler monkey.

Tertius: after the cops left, I laid down the law. No more Incidents. Put the fuck some *clothes* on, Ted! I don’t care if it’s SCUBA gear, mukluks and a fur parka, a suit of body armor, but you *will* henceforth go forth avec apparel!

So he started wearing a tiny fire-engine red Speedo.

I cannot begin to convey how disturbing *that* was, mostly because the li’l pot belly overhung that *sexe-cache* the way the demon Chernabog overhung the valley in

Disney's *Fantasia*.

Avon has never sent a rep to my house since that day, decades ago. Also, Pizza Hut will not deliver. Go figure.

AND SO IT WENT ON WITH US FOR MORE than thirty years. Ted growing more ensnared by a received universe that was both too small to contain him while simultaneously telling him he was a titan. It is hideously bifurcating to go among one's readers, many of whom look upon you as the mortal avatar of The Inviolable Chalice of Genius, having had to borrow the bus fare to get cross-country to the convention. He grew more and more careless of what his actions and life-choices would do to those he left behind, yet to those who met him casually he was more charming than a cobra at a mongoose rally.

And we continued to watch each other; sometimes to watch *over* each other. I have a letter from him I'd like to insert here. It was written during that very tough time in 1966-67 I mentioned earlier in this jaunt.

Though it may not seem so, this long in the wind, this exegesis is not about me. It is about the trails Ted and I cut with each other, an attempt to minutely codify the odd parameters of an odd friendship, a human liaison. So I'll not go into particulars about the shitstorm under which I went to my knees in '66-'67, save to tell you true that I was neither feckless nor freshly kicked off the turnip truck.

Nonetheless, I got hit hard, and Ted wrote this to me, dated April 18 1966:

Dear Harlan:

For two days I have not been able to get my mind off your predicament. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that your predicament is on my mind, a sharp-edged crumb of discomfort which won't whisk away or dissolve or fall off, and when I move or think or swallow, it gigs me.

I suppose the aspect that gigs me the most is 'injustice'. Injustice is not an isolated homogenous area any more than justice is. A law is a law and is either breached or not, but justice is reciprocal. That such a thing should have happened to you is a greater injustice than if it happened to most representatives of this exploding population.

I know exactly why, too. It is an injustice because you are on the side of the angels (who, by the way, stand a little silent for you just now). You are in the small company of Good Guys. You are that, not

by any process of intellectualization and decision, but reflexively, instantly, from the glands, whether it shows at the checkout in a supermarket or in a poolroom or in pulling out gut by the hank and reeling it up on the platen of your typewriter.

There is no lack of love in the world, but there is a profound shortage in places to put it. I don't know why it is, but most people who, like yourself, have an inherent ability to claw their way up the sheerest rockfaces around, have little of it or have so equipped themselves with spikes and steel hooks that you can't see it. When it shows in such a man, when it lights him up, it should be revered and cared for. This is the very nub of the injustice done you. It should not happen at all, but if it must happen, it should not happen to you.

You have cause for many feelings, Harlan: anger, indignation, regret, grief. Theodore Reik, who has done some brilliant anatomizations of love, declares that its ending is in none of these things: if it is, there is a good possibility that some or one or all of them were there all along. It is ended with *indifference* – really ended with real indifference. This is one of the saddest things I know. And in all my life, I have found one writer, once, who was able to describe the exact moment when it came, and it is therefore the saddest writing I have ever read. I give it to you now in your sadness. The principle behind the gift is called 'counter-irritation'. Read it in good health – eventual.

...and in case you think you misheard me over the phone, I would like you to know that if it helps and sustains you at all, you have my respect and affection.

yrs,

T.H. Sturgeon

Accompanying the letter was number 20 of *Twenty Love Poems Based on the Spanish of Pablo Neruda*, by Christopher Logue, from *Songs* (1959). And then, quickly, *Dangerous Visions* was published, Ted's marriage to Marion underwent heartbreak, Ted and I talked cross-country virtually every day, and in the wake of the notoriety of DV and his story 'If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister', which I had chivvied him into writing after a protracted writers' block dry spell and financial reverses, Ted came to live with me.

It was 1966, '67, and at various times I think it was for a full year, at other times memory insists it was longer, but separate

inputs staunchly declare it was only six, eight, ten months. I can't recall precisely, now more than forty years later, but it seemed to go on forever.

I have all of Ted's books, of course, but the only two he ever signed were my copy of *Dangerous Visions* with *all* the authors logged on – a rare artifact existent in the universe, as I've said, in the number of one – and my personal library copy of his first collection, *Without Sorcery*, Prime Press 1948, for which I paid a buck fifty (marked down from \$3.00) in 1952. Here is what he wrote on the front flyleaf in May of 1966 during my birthday gathering:

To Harlan Ellison—

Who has, at an equivalent stage in his career, done so much more – so much better.

—Theodore Sturgeon

That's gracious crap, of course, but what I *did* do was get Theodore Sturgeon writing again.

In the wake of my own day and night hammering on one of the half dozen or so Olympia office machines (never mind how many Olympia portables I had stashed), Ted grew chagrined at his facility to *talk* new story-ideas but not to *write* them, and I rode him mercilessly. The phrase "your fifteen minutes of fame has drained out of the hourglass" became taunt and tautology. I showed him no mercy; and with so many other younger writers passing through the way station of my home, all of them on the prod, worshipful but competitive, Ted ground his teeth and set up shop in the blue bedroom, and began writing.

I'd long-since gotten him inside *Star Trek*, but now – for the fastest money in town – I opened the market at *Knight* magazine. Sirkay Publications. Holloway House. The low-end men's magazines: *Adam*, *Cad*, *Knight*, *The Adam Bedside Reader*. Two hundred and fifty, three hundred, sometimes a little more, each pop...paid within 24 hours. Sometimes we'd kick the story around at the breakfast table; sometimes he'd come into my then-tiny office at the front of the house, dead of night, as I was pounding away under the unrelenting pressure of studio or publication deadlines, and we'd noodle something out. Sometimes it was a snag in one of my stories, sometimes it was his.

And we wrote 'Runesmith' together. And he wrote or plotted or set aside a snippet of the following, here at Ellison Wonderland:

'The Patterns of Dorne', 'It Was Nothing – Really!' and 'Brownshoes', 'Slow Sculpture', and 'Suicide', 'It's You', and 'Jorry's Gap', 'Crate', and 'The Girl Who Knew What They Meant'. Maybe others, I can't remember. But most of the stories that he finished when he was living with Wina about a mile away from me down the hill at 14210 Ventura Boulevard, La Fonda Motel, he plotted and started here before I threw him out.

Here's the flat of it, friends.

And Ted would understand this.

Most of what I know about Theodore Sturgeon I cannot tell you.

WE WATCHED EACH OTHER. HE LOOKED after me, I tried to help him. And then came out *Sturgeon is Alive and Well...*

Many of the stories from that last, final collection of (almost) all new fictions, got born here. Right downstairs in the blue bedroom. And I harassed my buddy Digby Diehl, the now-famous editor, who was at that time the editor of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* section, to let me review *Alive and Well*. And he did, beneath the copy editor's headline STURGEON'S LAW OVERTAKES HIM.

No good deed...

Here, reprinted for the first time, is that review, from the April 18, 1971 *LA Times*.

You will kindly note the cost of this 221-page hardcover in the early Seventies. This will give you an idea of the kind of money a writer as excellent as Sturgeon had to subsist on, it will also inform your understanding of the love-hate attitude even as lauded an artist as Sturgeon had with his work environment.

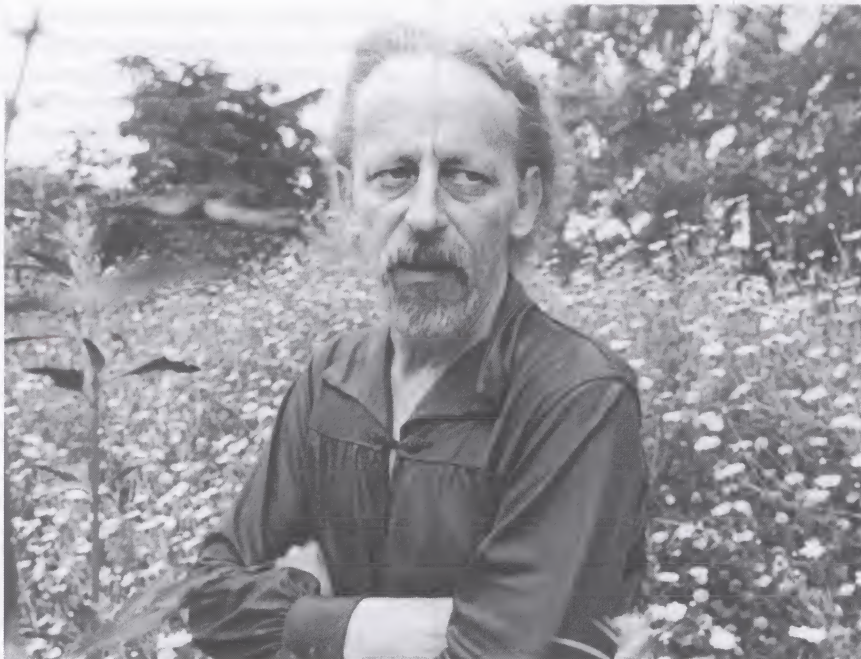
STURGEON IS ALIVE AND WELL...

a new collection of stories by Theodore Sturgeon

(G.P. Putnam's Sons – \$4.95)

Alive and well, yes definitely. But up to the level of his past brilliance, no I'm afraid not.

Theodore Sturgeon, you see, is without argument one of the finest writers – of any kind – this country has ever produced. His novels *More Than Human*, *Some of Your Blood*, and *The Dreaming Jewels* stand untarnished by time and endless re-readings as purest silver. His short stories have so completely examined the parameters of love in a genre of imagination woefully shy in that particular, that the words *love* and *Sturgeon* have become synonymous. The word *syzygy* also belongs to him.



Eric Weeks runs an excellent website dedicated to Theodore Sturgeon: physics.emory.edu/~weeks/misc/sturgeon.html

He is also much-quoted as the author of *Sturgeon's Law*, a Deep Thought that suggests 90% of everything is mediocre...puddings, plays, politicians; cars, carpenters, coffee; people, books, neurologists...everything. A realistic assessment of the impossibility of achieving perfection that, till now, has applied to everyone and everything save Sturgeon. Sadly, and at long last, his own *Law* has caught up with him. Ninety per cent of this new collection of stories is mediocre.

After a long and painful dry spell in which the creative well seemed emptied, Sturgeon began writing again three years ago, and eleven of the twelve stories herein contained date from this latest period of productivity. Only two of them approach the brilliance of stories like 'The Silken-Swift', 'A Saucer of Loneliness', 'Killdozer' or 'Bianca's Hands'. It has been said time and again about Sturgeon, that had he not suffered the ghastly stigmatizing ghettoization of being tagged a 'science fiction' writer, he might easily surpass John Collier, Donald Barthelme, Ray Bradbury or even Kurt Vonnegut as a mainstream fantasist of classic stature. Yet here, freed of that restriction, the fictions seem thin and too slick and forgettable; stories that could have been written by men not one-thousandth as special as Theodore Sturgeon.

'To Here and the Easel', a 1954 novellette printed here in hardcover for the first

time (and the only story to have a previous publication), is the longest, and the dull-est. A fantasy of schizophrenia in which a painter who can't paint swings back and forth between his life as Giles, helpless before his empty white canvas, and his life as Rogero, a knight out of *Orlando Furioso*, this overlong and rococo morality play seems embarrassingly reminiscent of the kind of pulp writing typified by L. Ron Hubbard's *Slaves of Sleep*, a novel bearing almost exactly the same plot-device Sturgeon employs.

Of the remaining eleven tales, five are straight mainstream, four are clearly sf oriented, and two are borderline. However, only two crackle with the emotional-load *aficionados* have come to revere in Sturgeon's work. In 'Take Care of Joey' a man whose world-view is built on the concept that no one performs a seemingly unselfish act "without there's something in it for him," finds just such a situation operating. A nasty, troublemaking little bastard named Joey is watched over by a guy named Dwight, who obviously hates the little rat. He goes way out of his way to keep Joey from getting the crap kicked out of him, up to and past the point where Dwight himself gets stomped. The narrator of the story has to find out why, and he does, and he finds out something else that makes this eleven-page short a stunning example of Sturgeon's off-kilter insight

and humanity.

'The Girl Who Knew What They Meant' is the other winner and it is so carefully-constructed, so meticulously-spun that not until the last twenty-seven words, the final three sentences, does the reader know he has had his soul wrung like the neck of a chicken. It is Sturgeon transcendent. And if Martha Foley's *Best American Short Stories* overlooks it this year, certainly there is no justice.

On sum, though the book is weak and for the most part a terrible disappointment, merely having Sturgeon writing again – and being able to prove it with slugs of type – is a blessing. And even with typographical errors rampant (a felony heretofore difficult to charge to Putnam's) it is a book well worth having done. Not just for those two incredible little short stories but by the same rationale that insists we preserve every letter and laundry list written by a Lincoln, a Hemingway or a Melville.

What I'm trying to say, is that Sturgeon is one of our best. He will be read and enjoyed a hundred years from now. So we *must* see it all, even the least successful of it.

This has been a difficult review to write.

Ted never told me what he thought of that piece. We had no bitterness over it, but we never sat down to bagels and lox about it, either. We were friends, and both of us knew that meant unshakable trust in the truth that we loved each other, that we respected and admired the best of each other's work in such a way that to blow smoke and/or sunshine up each other's kilt would have been to poison that trust. Unlike many writers who expect their friends to write blurbs and dispense encomia on the basis of camaraderie rather than the absolute quality of the work, Ted and I understood we could lie to others in that way, but never to each other.

So. Enough.

I have more, endless more that I could set down about Ted, about abiding with Ted, about the chill wind blowing through the burlesque houses of both our lives, but enough is enough.

Noël has suggested I take the eulogy I wrote for Ted in 1985, that appears near the beginning of this essay, and move it back here, because every time she reads it, she cries.

And she thinks it is a proper end for this love letter to my friend now dead more than two decades.

No, dear Noël, it has to stay where it is;

and I'll tell you my thinking here.

Ted wanted me to write his eulogy. He made me promise. And I did it. But I was so wracked by loss at the time, it was brief, far briefer than *this* eulogy. And thus I left out most of what's set down here in print for the first time. It is the for-real eulogy Ted probably wanted, and which I have perceived is being read over my shoulder as I've written it, by Ted's ghost. Not for you, Noël, not for any of Ted's other kids, not for Marion, not for the publisher who is herewith getting a major piece unexpectedly, and sure as hell not for admirers, fans, readers of Ted's work.

I have written this because Ted needs to read it, and because it is a picture of The Great Artist that cannot exist via *hoi polloi*. It had to be done by me, kiddo; and if you think this is all of it...

Most of what I know about Theodore Sturgeon I cannot tell you. I haven't told you about the two times we fought, the first being the imbroglio over that meanspirited piss-ant, the toweringly talented British novelist Anthony Burgess, who was a nasty little shit; and the second time subsequent to Ted doing one of the most awful things I've ever known of a human being doing to others, resulting in my telling him to get the fuck outta my house, now, tonight, this minute!

I haven't told you about Ted and the Meatgrinder; Ted and the Tongue-Tied Germans; Ted and the Apollo Trip; Ted and Chuck Barris in Movieland; Ted and the Wing-Walker; Ted and the Naked Monkey. Oh, trust me, I could go on for days. But...

Enough.

I would have liked to've written more extensively about how Ted and I wrote together, and the rest is whispers and memories. So, at last, after more than twenty years, Ted, I've kept my promise. In full.

TO SAY, AT FINISH, ONLY THIS. I MISS MY friend. I miss Ted's charm, his chicanery, his talent, his compassion. I miss them because they will never, not ever, not embodied in anyone or anything, never ever exist on any plane we can perceive. Those of you who never met him, who have only read him, can know what an emptiness there will forever be in your life. Because I know the emptiness in mine. ▣

In somewhat altered form, this essay will appear as the introduction to *The Nail and the Oracle, Vol. XI: The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon* (North Atlantic Books, 304pp, \$35 hb), published in July.

THE AFTERBLIGHT CHRONICLES KILL OR CURE

By Rebecca Levene



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David Cleary is a technical writer, sometime computer programmer, and author of several published short stories as well as three as-yet unpublished novels. Some of what he writes is science fiction, and some of what he writes is just strange. One of his stories, 'All Our Sins Forgotten', was adapted in 1998 into an episode of the Sci-fi Channel's series *Welcome to Paradox*.



Doug Sirois: When I first read this story I wanted to focus on the characters and create a montage that'd help give the viewer a sense of the mystery in the story. I also wanted to give a sense of when this story might have taken place.

DR ABERNATHY'S DREAM THEATER by DAVID IRA CLEARY illustrated by DOUGLAS A. SIROIS

In our advanced age, where yesterday's novelties are today's commonplaces, and every young woman clamors to drive the diesel car that five years ago only the bravest prototype engineer would have dared sit inside, there is no place for lassitude or idleness. Revolutions might happen in the space of a catnap. Elements might be discovered in the blink of an eye. A leisurely lunch might see Evaristo Monij produce an article or small book. It is therefore incumbent upon the man of science that he spare no effort to operate efficiently.

To that end, I have recently found that a tincture of kuuf, using an aqueous base, sparkles the wit, combats fatigue, and increases concentration. And it relieves the tedium of those long dinner parties where grandmothers or great-aunts, having mistaken certain scholarly themes in my recent work for comments upon my psychological longings, feel compelled to introduce me to their unmarried granddaughters or thrice-divorced nieces.

It was one such dinner that led me to Dr Abernathy's Dream Theater.

I had just said a word or two in honor of the hostess, the estimable Mrs Taupe, whose efforts to see me reinstated at the University of Wensceslao must surely bear fruit soon. I sat back down and tasted my soup. It was a thin chicken stock in which floated sliced leeks of exquisite texture and flavor. As I savored them I noticed the striking couple across from me, a brother

and sister perhaps, black-haired, dark-eyed, both with the sharp and severe beauty one associates with the mystically-inclined.

To my left sat a Mrs Babino, seventyish, bespectacled, her right lens, in the fashion made popular by one of Monij's essays, telescopic, a two inch protuberance which she adjusted often, usually to catch a glimpse of my hands or my face. To my right sat Miss Paula Babino, the daughter, sweet, shy, and not a day over forty. As I ate my soup, I carefully swallowed one leek as I lifted the next to my mouth, thereby diminishing opportunities for conversation.

But alas – I finished the leeks long before the appetizer arrived, and as I hesitated, soup spoon poised over the naked chicken stock, Mrs Babino pounced. "Professor Stavan," she said, "I can see how you eat as though this might be your last meal for some days."

Vistas of dullness opened up before me. "I'm, um, er –"

"A young man should never have to miss a meal because his labors demand his time."

"Uh," I said. I reached into my waistcoat pocket, brought out my vial of kuuf. My water glass was empty, and in a panic (if my torpid confused state could be described thus) I put a pinch of kuuf into my soup. I stirred.

"Hup!" Paula said, hand to her mouth.

The soup was turning blue.

Mrs Babino pretended not to see it. "A scientist – I hope you don't mind if I use

that racy term – should have someone to cook his meals, and iron his collars, and clean his stove-pipe."

"I don't smoke," I said foolishly. The black-haired couple had noticed my blue soup, and I bent over it, as I began spooning the liquid into my mouth fast as I could.

"Hap!" said Paula, again touching her mouth: a kind of laugh or explosive giggle.

I finished the soup in seconds, embarrassment mounting as the kuuf's effects increased. I saw the black-haired woman looking at me, disapproving and judgmental, as if I'd broken some rule in her mystical universe.

I could not bear her scrutiny and I turned toward Mrs Babino. "I am expecting to become reestablished at the University, at which point I will rehire a housekeeper and perhaps a cook."

My faculties had returned. I spoke wisely, and Mrs Babino, no doubt impressed by my words, adjusted the focus on her telescopic lens as though better to watch my lips. "I would think, so many servants would be prohibitive in this expensive age."

"Nonsense!" I said. I warmed to the topic. "They can be had at the cheap! Especially the servants I prefer – elderly men, maimed and illiterate. There's no one more honest!"

"Hip!" Paula said, again covering her mouth. This time I saw she was catching something – a fine upper set of ivory dentures, which she returned with a delicate motion to her mouth.



I was instantly charmed.

The kuuf had sharpened my perceptions and revitalized my spirits. I saw what lovely skin Paula had, and how the smile lines around her eyes said volumes about her good humor, and how the hollow of her throat was flushed. She pinched her chin – and I instantly understood the meaning of *this* gesture.

I wiped my beard; my napkin came away blue.

"You're teasing me, aren't you?" said Mrs Babino. "You must understand that I'm not talking about a valet or a cook. I'm talking about *companionship*."

"What is a companion?" I said. I had recovered from my embarrassment, and felt my powers renewed. "A helpmeet, a smiling face, a ready laugh? A sympathetic ear, a hand to chop radishes, a talent for organizing a household? A cheek to caress, a perfume to scent a sleeping chamber, a clear voice to call to the inevitable children?"

"All that," said Mrs Babino. I had thought to embarrass her, but she kept her telescope trained on me. "Any man requires that."

"But a naturalist is not *any* man," I said. They were serving the main course, a filleted songfish poached in an apricot sauce, and I noticed that the dark-haired couple, as well as several others at the table, seemed more interested in my speech than the entrée. "A naturalist would require more of a companion. He would require that she be not just sympathetic to his research, but conversant in it. She must be understanding when his obsessions render him silent, patient when his frustrations leave him ill-tempered, willing to sacrifice comforts so laboratory glassware might be acquired. She must tolerate the smells of formalin and machine oil. And most importantly she must pray at the altar of empiricism." I didn't want to be rude to my hostess, so I took a slice of songfish. "I would not wish a regime so severe on any human being."

The songfish seemed to melt like butter in my mouth, sweet apricot a perfect foil to the salty fish taste. Mrs Babino seemed at a loss; perhaps I'd waxed too eloquent.

"Professor Stavan," Paula said, "I have read your book?"

"You *have*?"

"About the Waterwall?"

"Oh, that essay." My heart was thumping, my vagus nerve operational. What better essay to have read than the one in which I recount my voyage beyond the Waterwall to investigate the metaphysical underpinnings

of the universe? "And what did you think of its theological implications?"

"Implications?" she asked. "I liked the horn-worm?"

"The what?"

"You know, the big worm that swims *inside* the Waterwall, except when it reaches out to impale passing sailors with its horns?"

"Uh..." I said.

"That's not in Professor Stavan's essay," the black-haired woman said icily. "You're talking about Monij's *Des Profundis*."

"Hup!" Paula's dentures flew out of her mouth, to land between her songfish and her braised asparagus.

One of kuuf's virtues is that it accelerates the cycle of infatuation, love, grief, and recovery. I spent a minute eating my songfish, speculating on the equations that might describe the meniscus in my just-refilled water glass, sensing the dull ache in my chest mediated by my autonomic system. I'd thought for an instant that Paula might play the 'companion' role that Mrs B had suggested. I had been cruelly

I finished the last of my kuuf – in my water it dissolved colorlessly – and thus fortified I spoke at length on Professor Soergel's program to make synthetic rubber from the spermaceti of the dog-whale. I addressed the table as a whole, but it was Paula who "hupped!"; blushed, and answered my rhetorical questions as if she were sitting for an exam she must pass. (How often are the enthusiasms of the natural philosopher taken for signals of a hidden agenda!) When at last the meal was over, and I'd said goodbye to the gracious Mrs Taupe, Paula and Mrs Babino insisted on accompanying me outside.

In the driveway were the roars of engines and the smell of diesel fumes, as chauffeurs warmed the cars belonging to the wealthy patrons of the sciences.

I needed to walk to the taxi-stand nearby where I hoped the hackney with its one-eyed horse, which had brought me here, might be waiting.

"Oh, Professor Stavan," Mrs B said, "we have been so riveted by your presence tonight."

I saw the young black-haired couple,

One of kuuf's virtues is that it accelerates the cycle of infatuation, love, grief, and recovery. I spent a minute eating my songfish

disabused of that notion. But grief soon loosed its grip around my heart, and I began to listen to the black-haired woman, who was disputing something with the young man beside her.

"– Dr Abernathy is expecting you," she said.

"I'm too tired," he said.

"Tired's perfect," she said. "You need to sleep to dream."

"But I'm exhausted. And exhausted dreams are *embarrassing* dreams. I don't want the Dream Theater to humiliate me again."

From across the table I could not contain my curiosity. "Dream Theater?"

The young man stared daggers at me. The woman, however, smiled for the first time, corners of her closed lips raised just perceptibly.

They continued discussing what I imagined were the dream rituals of their cult of mysteries, but whispering so softly even my kuuf-enhanced hearing could not resolve their words.

Worried that I might be subjected to more of Paula's literary misattributions,

standing by a low open-topped automobile, and – judging by their stance towards one another – arguing.

"It was very nice to meet you both," I said to Mrs Babino.

Paula watched me expectantly as Mrs B gripped my elbow and said, "Could we possibly call –"

"Of course, if my schedule permits," I said. "But I must apologize to this young couple!"

I pulled away so abruptly from Mrs B that she tottered.

"Hap!" said Paula, supporting her.

I hurried to the young couple. They had no chauffeur. *She* was climbing the ladder to the driver's seat, while he remained on the passenger's side of the car, clenching the passenger's ladder so hard his knuckles looked bloodless.

"Dear sir," I said, "I would like to apologize for intruding on your conversation at dinner."

"Quite all right," he said. Then he rapped the ladder against the car's wooden side panel. "I'm sure you can't be held responsible for what tincture of kuuf might make you say."

"Raphael!" the young woman cried out.

"Shouldn't we be frank in our discourse? As in dreams, so in speech? And I'm sure you'd agree, former-Professor Stavan, that technical explicitness is preferable to hints and veiled references?"

"Stop taking it out on him," the woman said.

"Why? He's the one it's about, isn't he?"

The man's tone was cool, but his bearing matched his hot words. He turned and fairly *marched*, not pausing even when he had bumped into the elderly gentleman who had been sitting to Paula's right at dinner. When the young woman called out to him, "At least let me take you home!" he replied: "Let the ex-professor sit with you. He can regale you with reports on synthetic rubber."

I noticed Paula and Mrs B walking in our direction, and when the young woman motioned me into the automobile, I climbed in.

"I don't understand any of this," I said.

"Raphael doesn't want to spend another night at the Dream Theater. And he's jealous that I wanted to meet you."

her jealous – friend – roamed the streets. I was also aware of the fragmentary nature of my thoughts. "I should be – home, or conveyed –"

"You could come to the Dream Theater, in Raphael's place. Mr Monij doesn't know about it yet!"

"When? Where?"

"Tonight!"

I realized the cause of my dullness, my sweating, the perturbations of my thinking process. I pulled out the vial in which I kept my kuuf.

It remained empty.

"Can we stop at another laboratory first?"

.....
She drove me to the dismal precinct of Wenceslao that some call the Fickle Virgin, others, Lost Without A Trace. In my enervated state, the donkeys pulling coal-carts seemed diabolical, the seedy row-houses the walls of a claustrophobic tunnel, and on every corner a street urchin seemed to scrutinize me with a high-quality spyglass. My one consolation was Remzi. Her severe beauty buoyed my spirits, and her description of her group's

impurities and ash fell into a second bucket. I tried not to stare at the table of glass-ware behind Mr Retort with its labeled jars of pure white kuuf.

"This is Miss Remzi –" I began.

"Remzi, just Remzi," she said. She stepped into the room. "Surnames so often connote noble connections or career where none exists."

"We're lucky that way, then!" Mr Retort said. He introduced himself and Mr Alembic, then said, "So, Stavan, you're corrupting the flower of youth now?"

"Er –" I said, fumbling in my waistcoat pocket for the empty vial.

"I, sir, am a *Sciencer*," Remzi said.

"A what?" Mr Retort's eyebrows made inverted Vs. "A seancer?"

"She's a pure one," Mr Alembic said.

"All them educated kids live like that these days. Don't touch the tobacco or the simple sugars, let alone the kuuf."

"Heavens!" Mr Retort said. "What pleasure can life bring you?"

"The pleasures of the mind, work, and our natural faculties are infinite in number."

I brought out my vial. "I'd like this refilled. For myself."

Mr Retort took my vial and refilled it. Meanwhile, Mr Alembic dragged the ash bucket away from the Oven and toward a window, which he levered open.

I remembered, barely, that kuuf does not come free, and I withdrew three ten peseta notes from my money pouch.

Mr Retort beamed. "Any better a customer, Professor Stavan, and I'll start giving you the volume discount!"

I thanked him. As I was leading Remzi out of the room, I saw Mr Alembic pour the contents of the ash bucket out the window. He cried out: "Better watch out where you're walking and who you're walking with, Miss Remzi, 'cause impurities might seek you out!"

.....
We traveled from the Fickle Virgin to the Dream Theater by a circuitous route whose particulars I am sworn not to reveal, though I can say that early on we stopped at the electric-lit Conservatory of Flowers, whose display of predatory flora I played a part in organizing, and where Remzi met a man near the moonflower exhibit, obtaining directions to the Dream Theater, which is held at fortnight intervals, at a different location each time. I will not describe him except to remark upon his noxious habit of brushing the taste-cilia of the moonflower's blossoms with an emery board, causing

"You *are* frank in your discourse," I said. "And I don't even know your name."

"Remzi," she said. Not only was she frank, but she was fully capable of driving. With practiced motion she pulled at the vehicle's steering straps as she pushed at its foot-pedals. I nodded politely at Mrs B and Paula as Remzi moved us into the driveway. We passed Raphael who glared at me. My tincture of kuuf supplied me with a sudden inspiration.

"You're not brother and sister."

"You thought we were?"

"Your hair. Your pallor. Your seriousness."

"We dye our hair," she said. She turned onto the street. "It symbolizes our commitment."

"You are engaged?"

"Of course not. We do not believe in pair-bonding."

I panicked. "Then is it your commitment to – to the cult of the Dream Theater?"

"What are you talking about? We are committed to Science. The Dream Theater is a scientific laboratory."

I was sweating, aware of the impropriety, and possible danger, of being alone in an automobile with a young woman while

rigorous application of scientific principles to everyday living – from their diets of fruit and fish, to the wooden boards they slept on to benefit their spines, to the mathematical analyses they performed before choosing wardrobes, friends, or living quarters – gave me hope that my career had not been in vain.

At last we reached the house with the laboratory in question. Remzi accompanied me. Even as the servant led us up the staircase to the top floor of the house, the pungent smell of roasting kuuf bark enlivened my sensations.

"Back so soon, Stavan?" said Mr Retort. (Those in the kuuf trade take pseudonyms.) Bushy-browed and bent with age, the man stood before his Roasting Oven, shaking with fine motion a sieve-like tray in which chips of kuuf bark seemed to dance. To one side of the large hot oven Mr Alembic, of middle years with a grizzled beard, pulled, alternately, at two handles, drawing from the oven the hot semi-processed bark. From one pipe in the oven, a shiny silvery powder, kuuf in its raw form, came out in little bursts, to fall into a bucket. From another pipe, a steady stream of dark

them to snap shut as though a horse-cricket or jump-mouse had alit upon them. Such pranks are detrimental to the elasticity of the blossom-hinge; I did not reprimand him because I had not yet taken my kuuf and was still in a state of lethargy. Indeed, it was as we were leaving the Conservatory that I bought a bottle of carbonated ginger water from a concessionaire.

I poured a quarter of the vial into the bottle.

"Don't show them your vial at the Dream Theater," Remzi told me.

I took a draught of the ginger water. "They are that judgmental?"

"No more so than your Mr Alembic," she said.

As the kuuf awakened me I realized how rude the man had been toward her. "I apologize for his comments," I said. "Kuuf dealers can be a rough lot."

I saw Remzi smile for the second time.

Though Remzi had called the Dream Theater a scientific laboratory, she had not elaborated on that description. I therefore had not entirely abandoned my preconceived notion of the Theater as a place where mystic rites, perhaps garbed with pseudoscientific nomenclature, might take place.

My first impressions of the Theater supported my preconceptions.

Like an ancient temple beneath a modern building in the city of Boccea, the Theater was in the basement of an abandoned warehouse. The dusty space was poorly-lit by candlelight and weak incandescent bulbs, bringing to mind the mystic's cheap trick of darkness. It had at its center, like an altar, a narrow bed and four chairs. Arranged in a circle around this 'altar' were a large number of tables; at each sat several persons, black-haired, somberly-dressed, and talking in low voices, as if they dared not disturb the sanctity of this place with too much noise.

But what ancient temple would have a young man playing a bright march upon the pianoforte, accompanied by a girl no more than twelve playing the flute and another man the dulcet-harp?

Remzi waved at the harpist then led me to an empty table on which a candle in a red jar burned.

His companions still playing, the harpist abandoned his instrument and strode over to our table.

"Remzi, I see Raphae has metamorphosed into Jaromir Stavan!"

"This is Dr Abernathy," Remzi said. I shook the man's hand, noticed that though his shoulder-length hair was glossy-black, he looked considerably older than Remzi and the others. And his face, clean-shaved, hairy-nostriled, sharp-cheekboned, and dimple-chinned, seemed familiar – but I've noticed that many faces look familiar under the influence of kuuf.

"Bent on demolishing more fantastic claims with the sober eye of scientific?" Dr Abernathy asked. Before I could answer, he grabbed my bottle of ginger water and sniffed it. "And sober you'll be."

He handed the bottle back to me.

One of kuuf's virtues is that it is odorless when dissolved in water. Abernathy sat with us, and explained his program to me. "We are cartographers, Stavan. We explore the world of dreams, find its landmarks, boundaries, its cities and its empty spaces."

"What is there to explore," I asked, "that Orestel didn't chart years ago?"

Remzi laughed – a sound I would have thought her incapable of – but Dr Abernathy frowned, chin puckering, and he said, "Orestel was an armchair

"What if I were?"

"You would have known Orestel. He was stripped of his academic rank and made a door-to-door vendor. Or so it was rumored."

"The Revolutionary Council forced many into vending. Some had worse fates. I was lucky to escape."

"But you were colleagues. Perhaps rivals."

Abernathy slapped me on the back.

"Nozroizians were never competitive that way, Stavan. At least not before the revolutionary. Now, look." Two men and two women came out onto the stage, carrying a large travelling trunk. They were followed by a young man dressed in a fleece sleeping-gown and a silk nightcap with a reflective tassel. The man climbed onto the bed, while two of the four began withdrawing items from the trunk: black boxes, tubes. The man reclined on his back, head and shoulders supported by pillows. Abernathy described the boxes as the two began connecting them to the man by means of the tubes. One measured his pulse, another the voltage differential of two places on his skull, a third the rate

Though Remzi had called the Dream Theater a scientific laboratory, she had not elaborated on that description

naturalist. His ideas were beautiful but had no predictive power. His catalogs of mental phenomenals and dream patterns were pretty, but skewed, based as they were upon the fancies of the chambermaids, barkeepers, and ragamuffins that he was forced to interview. Those of the respectable classes would not tell them their secrets. And worst of all, his methodical was subjective. He was forced to rely on the subjective reports of his subjects, rather than objective criteria."

A thousand objections came to mind – Abernathy's cavalier dismissal of one of our century's great minds bordered on the criminal – but I contented myself with saying, "Dreams *are* subjective! How else to study them than by listening to dreamers' reports?"

"The Dream Theater," Abernathy said. "Our equipment makes precise measurements of the dreamer's physiological statics. Our actors enact the dramas the machines reveal."

I noticed his odd substitution of 'statics' for 'states'. His error was characteristic of exiles from the poor benighted country of Nozroz. "Are you Nozroizian?"

and oxygen-volume of his respiration. And finally there was a pair of what Abernathy called 'dream goggles'. These had enormous lenses, glass hemispheres big as scrub-bird eggs that covered each of the man's eyes from cheekbone to center of his forehead, and each of which was connected by a black tube to another box. "The dream goggles hold a charged gas," Abernathy said, "which conforms to the closed eyelids. When the dreamer dreams, his eyes move to track the objects of his dreams. The varying pressures occasioned by his moving eyeballs excite the gaseous, creating a faint luminescent pattern. Each goggle acts as a lens, magnifying the luminescent pattern so that it may be seen in the smoke column."

I saw the woman onstage setting up a burner on a stand. "And you chant, and throw ground-up cricket wings over your shoulder, and the man's dream-images appear within the smoke?"

"It's just flickering motions of light," Remzi said. "The actors guess what those motions might represent, and, if they can, they enact onstage what they interpret the dreamer is seeing."

There was a sorrowful note in her voice;

I feared that my sarcasm, which had been aimed at Abernathy, had wounded her instead. "I am intrigued, of course, by your system."

"No need to be apologetic!" Abernathy said. "We welcome your skepticism!" He slapped me on the back. "But we hope you'll try dreaming next. We do have an open slot with Raphae missing. And we'd hope you wouldn't be so prejudiced against the theater that it would preclude you from disinterested participation."

"I'll participate," I said. "But if I'm asleep, how can I judge how accurately the theater portrays my dreams?"

"Every Sciencer at the tables records what the players play," Rezmi said, bringing out a sheaf of paper and a pen.

"It's time for the first performance," Dr Abernathy said, standing up.

Abernathy told the Sciencers the particulars of the first subject. He was called Limbix. He was twenty-three, sixty-nine kilos, mildly hypertensive. Remzi and the Sciencers duly recorded these facts.

Having spoken, Abernathy returned to

explained to me that Limbix was not yet dreaming. "There are seasons of sleep," she whispered. "Dr Abernathy's research has shown this. A summer season of shallow sleep, an autumn of deeper sleep, a winter of sleep so deep that one must shake the sleeper to wake him. And finally a spring where dreams occur. The normal sleeper must pass through all those seasons before he can dream."

I nodded, amazed first that such a basic fact of human physiology had been hidden from science for so long. And second that I'd been privileged to have so attractive a Sciencer relate it to me.

At last Limbix dreamed.

His goggles glinted continuously. In the column of smoke, marks, squiggles, bars, appeared then disappeared in rapid succession. To my frustration nothing cohered. I could make no sense of what they represented. Now they looked like the blackboard scribbles of a demented scholar, now like the patterns skaters make on ice. Knowing that kuuf can increase visual acuity, I drank down half the bottle of ginger water.

his dulcet-harp. The trio changed their tune, no longer playing a march, but a sweet slow-tempoed melody, or rather medley, in which I detected bars from 'Baby's Head is Heavy', and 'Orphan's Lament' and other such nonsense mothers sing to lull their children to sleep. Meanwhile the actors had lit the burner, at the end of the bed, and gathered around the odorless plume of gray smoke it produced. I sipped at my kuuf. As I watched the man who was obviously still awake, stretching a leg, scratching his belly, I mentioned to Remzi that I couldn't imagine falling asleep under such conditions. "You should whisper, Professor Stavan." She had moved so close to me I could smell her breath, and, I thought, the laboratory formalin on her fingers. "The music is optimized to induce sleep."

I sipped my kuuf and did not move away from her.

Limbix indeed fell asleep. His goggles produced occasional green glints which manifested as brief hatchmarks within the plume of smoke. The actors observed the smoke but did not move to enact their observations. I complained to Remzi. She

The effects were immediate. My pulse quickened, my nasal passages cleared, I began to sweat and tap my toes. I felt an ungallant impulse to touch Remzi's hand. And within the column of smoke I began to see visions.

Or, not visions, but rather the shadows of visions, the outlines of dreams. It wasn't a scholar's scribbles that I'd seen. It was the scholar himself. I saw the mortarboard on his head, his angry brow, his cruel chin, and in his hand a piece of chalk which changed into a beating-stick. I knew at once which of Orestel's dream categories Limbix's dream fit into: the Father. Authoritative, rigid, unforgiving: the Scholar is one of his many aspects, and the dream a common one.

But the actors saw something different.

One actor had put on a wide-brimmed straw hat. He had a stick and with a flick of his wrist was pantomiming what I realized to be the arm-motion of a fisherman, casting bait into water. One of the other actors threw a cloth on the floor, apparently intended to represent a fish. The actress rolled on top of the cloth, and suddenly the fisherman was apparently

reeling not the cloth but *her* in. As she came close he made to kiss her; but she put on a gray wig and hunched one of her shoulders so that she appeared to be a crone, and he pushed her away.

They were getting it wrong.

They impressed with their rapid costume changes and prop substitutions; they awed with their instantaneous transformations from role to role; they stunned with their ability to act as a unit with the play of light on smoke their only guide.

But the roles were wrong. The Scholar turned into the Warrior, crested helmet, shooting an arrow at a deer; they played a love-cherub, flinging a poisoned dart at a maiden so that he might ravish her paralyzed form. The Warrior became the Captain; and the woman pantomimed working a loom, not the tiller of a ship. And when the loom changed into a runaway train, symbolic of the Vehicle archetype and the uncertainties it implies, the woman and two of the men made a sort of carriage in which they conveyed the third man to a pleasant picnic.

Finally the column darkened. The dream was over. The musicians played another song, in the style of Scontakan, pleasant at first but gradually disharmonious, as if with each passing measure one more wrong note must be played.

When the song became excruciating Limbix woke up.

"Very impressive," I told Abernathy when he rejoined us. "I'm glad you allow your artists the license to interpret dreams so liberally."

"Still obsessing about Orestel, Stavan?"

"You must grant that his categories are at least useful approximations."

"In the same way that the five elements of the alchemists approximated atomic theoretical. But here." He handed me a form on which I wrote my personal characteristics. Then he said, "Why don't you take the Professor to the changing room, Remzi?"

When I rose, ginger-water bottle in hand, Remzi whispered, "You shouldn't have any more. You need to fall asleep."

Though I hadn't slept in three days, I left the bottle on the table.

As we walked past the tables of the other Sciencers, I couldn't help but notice them – pens in hand, candle-wax dripping onto their notes and graphs – stealing glances at Remzi and myself.

I had an urge to strut which I did not express.

Remzi brought me to an electric-lit room lined with mostly empty metal shelves. On one shelf was a stack of sleeping-gowns; she selected one and handed it to me. Then she went to another shelf on which there was a slatted wooden crate. She pulled out something, U-shaped and cellophane-wrapped. Then she stood before me, beautiful, brilliant, and, for the first time in our acquaintance, shy. Finally she said, "I hope to hear more about synthetic rubber from you, Professor Stavan."

As she handed me the U-shaped object, our fingers brushed.

Then she left.

The object was a rubber-clad horseshoe. There had been a brief vogue for shodding horses in such shoes, but the expense of rubber, and the popularity of the automobile, had rendered their manufacture unprofitable. Normally such an object might have put me into a melancholy. But as I changed into my sleeping-gown, the kuuf, and the memory of Remzi's touch, made me think what bold innovators the rubber horseshoe men had been, and how with synthetic rubber the horseshoe industry might still have its best days ahead of it.

It is a testament to kuuf, and to the enthusiasm that the attentions of a young woman can inspire, that I felt not embarrassed but eager to lie down on the bed before the audience. I felt no shame when I heard Abernathy read my weight; it mattered not that this was a hall where my lecture would not be directed by my conscious mind, but rather by Orestel's Unconscious Garden, with its uninhibited, true, and potentially scandalous contents.

I was proud to further dream research, not just report it.

I can't deny, however, that the sleeping-gown's mid-calf length exposed my ankles to the rough cold blanket, and that the rubber pulse-tube strapped to my arm hurt me, and that the voltage-meter buttons pasted to my temples made my skin itch maddeningly. Nor can I claim that the dream-goggles were comfortable. They were hot, and squeezed my nostrils shut so I had to breathe through my mouth. And when the actress (black-haired and beautiful herself) lowered a charcoalized celluloid filter within the goggles, I could hardly see: the candle-flames looked like faint stars, the actors shadows.

"It's easier to sleep if it's dark," the actress

explained. "The flashes are exterior to the filter."

She slid a wedge-shaped pillow beneath my head, grooved in its center so that I would face the column of smoke.

"Close your eyes now," the actress said, "and sleep."

There was a humming. "What's that?" I said.

"The tank producing gas," she whispered. "Now sleep."

I heard a hiss, felt a cool pressure on my eyes, closed them. The trio transitioned from march to lullaby. With my eyes closed I found the music not cloying but profound. In the 'Orphan's Lament' I heard how each instrument played a part – the flute the part of the motherless child searching for a place where she might sleep, the dulcet-harp the goodwife, the chambermaid, and the others who pity the child enough to hand her candies or articles of clothing while refusing her shelter; and the piano, whose arpeggios, sometimes louder, sometimes softer, stood for the icy streets and snow flurries through which the child had to travel. And when finally

The gas had a water vapor content that soothed my eyes so I could keep from blinking.

I waited for the players to resume their stations, but apparently their machinery registered that I was not near the dream season of sleep – they seemed to be wandering around the stage.

As the musicians played 'March of the Banana Cream Mercenaries', I saw the actress turn toward me. Her face seemed bright, as if spot-lit, and I noticed how much she looked like Remzi. She had the pallor and the black hair of all the Sciencers, but Remzi's intensity, Remzi's cold beauty. I wondered what it would be like to kiss her lips. Simultaneous with that thought a man approached her. Handsome, bearded, wearing the same sort of paisley vest that I'd been partial to in my days as a doctoral student. As I watched him kiss her I realized who he was.

It was *me*.

I thought about loosening her hair and he reached up to pull out the pin from her bun.

"No!" someone screamed.

The music stopped.

Remzi and myself – or the actors who were playing us – turned toward the tables. I heard cries, someone fall to the floor

the girl finds the warmest place she can, a baker's oven, only to meet her inevitable tragic end, I was moved almost to tears.

But I wasn't falling asleep. I was relaxed, my train of thought disjointed, my breath and pulse slow; if sleep is a precipice, I was at its edge, but it was an edge I could not fall from. It was a circumstance familiar to me from recent weeks, and one of the drawbacks to kuuf.

I heard footsteps and then voices. I opened my eyes.

I saw a flash of green, as of heat lightning on a horizon, then a few nearby sparkles. The actors seemed all to be looking out at whomever had made the commotion. Abernathy had paused in his playing of the dulcet-harp. I heard a chair move, as though someone were sitting down. The harp was silent for a moment more. And in that moment I conceived the notion of keeping my eyes open, *watching* the players. If I could not sleep, if I could not dream, I wondered if their performance would reflect that, or if they would improvise some farce based upon random squiggles within the smoke column.

Abernathy resumed playing.

Remzi and myself – or the actors who were playing us – turned toward the tables. I heard cries, someone fall to the floor.

Then someone strode onto the stage. It was a man. He pushed the actor aside, waved something which frightened the actress so that she crouched. Then he came toward me. As he approached the bed his goggle-grayed-and-blurred form resolved into a demon, crimson-faced, coal-eyed, goat-like obsidian shards, with three pearly horns curving from his forehead. He held a crystal dagger in his hand. He raised the dagger, then, as he brought it down, I rolled away from him. My motion tore the goggles off my head; they flew into his face as he plunged the dagger into the mattress. I fell off the bed onto the floor, my arm burning, the man (less demon than Sciencer, I saw) cursing as he tried to pull his knife up.

Coming from behind him, Dr Abernathy brought his dulcet-harp down upon the man.

An awful discord, worse than that closing Scontakan's *Operatina*, was produced as harpstrings broke over the man's head and the frame came down to his shoulders like a yoke.

He fell unconscious onto the bed, red blood streaming down his pale face, and I saw he was no demon.

He was Raphae, Remzi's jealous friend.

My pulse-tube, still attached to my arm, had caught onto the hilt of his knife so he could not lift it from the mattress.

.....
Though it was Raphae who was injured the Sciencers congregated around me. They unhooked my tubes, sat me down on a chair, and brought me a glass of water. They asked me questions: how did I know to move, did I know techniques that would allow me to integrate my environment into my dreams? Feeling a disassociation that was part the familiar effect of kuuf deprivation, part residual dream-theater-mediated relaxation, and part the fear that danger brings, I was unable to answer them. Indeed I was more interested in Remzi, who appeared to be crying, and Dr Abernathy, who'd extricated Raphae from the broken harp and was now bandaging his wounds. As he bent over the unconscious man, I saw that his (Abernathy's) hair was asymmetrical, more-than-shoulder-length

an essay describing the Dream Theater. (Fueled by kuuf, and taking advantage of a typing machine that Remzi has lent me, my productivity has been astounding.) In it I describe the Theater, its actor-scientists, and their method of enacting the dreams registered by the goggles and projected into the smoke-column. I conclude that their method is nothing short of revolutionary. No longer need we be burdened with half-remembered phantasms, or cloudy images that remain stubbornly portentous in the daylight hours. The Dream Theater brings to center stage our internal dramas, where they can be recorded by independent observers and then scrutinized beneath the arc-lamps of objectivity.

Though I honor Dr Abernathy's wish to maintain his pseudonym I do not shy from mentioning Raphae. Indeed, it is Raphae's attack on me that motivates the speculative portion of my essay. I believe that while I was not sleeping, I was in fact *dreaming*; kuuf, while inhibiting the sleep-system of the brain, must encourage the dream-system. My romantic fantasies regarding Remzi were enacted onstage, and Raphae,

on one side, ear-length on the other. He wore a wig, I realized, and it occurred to me exactly who he was.

"He's Dr Orestel," I said to Remzi, as she helped me off the stage. "Abernathy is Orestel disguised."

"Professor Stavan," Remzi said, "you need to forget Orestel. Psychology has moved on. So should you."

She spoke with authority; she spoke with precision. I much preferred her scientific mode to her emotional mode. Still I wanted to demonstrate I was not without compassion. "I'm sorry about Raphae," I said.

"What?"

"He must be important to you. I saw you crying."

We were climbing the staircase. She stopped, pushed my hands against the railing as though to make sure I was secured, then said, "Professor Stavan, I wasn't crying about Raphae. I was crying about you!"

Then she climbed one step higher, so that our faces were on the level, and she kissed my cheek.

.....
In a single day I wrote the first draft of

driven into a jealous rage, attacked me.

If I had indeed been sleeping, I would have died.

Kuuf saved me.

Now I must decide. Is it better to end with that flat statement, or should I rigorously extrapolate from the personal to the universal? Should I be an advocate for kuuf? Should I argue that society should not condemn kuuf but embrace it? Should I point out how kuuf fuels creativity, how it keeps engineers alert at their stations, experimenters wide-eyed in their labs, poets and priests nimble-tongued at their podiums? Should I mention how it brings love to the loveless, regularity to the constipated, and brightness to the dull? Should I relate how kuuf allowed me to discard Orestel's rigid dream categories in favor of the fluid categories of Abernathy – and suggest that we could enter a new world of mentality if only we would give kuuf our approbation?

Or perhaps I should keep my promise to Remzi, and withhold my endorsement of kuuf, thereby risking that our future will be not just sober, but colorless, sleepy, and grim. ▣

A mystery in Afghanistan leads to the end of the world...

Lightning Days

By Colin Harvey

Finalist for
2006 USA
BookNews
Best Book
Awards

Available from
Amazon.com
and
Swimming
Kangaroo Books



Tim Lees was a regular contributor to *The Third Alternative*, but this is his first story for *Interzone*. He's presently hard at work putting the finishing touches to *Gods of LA*, a detective novel set in, well, LA, surprisingly. His story collection, *The Life to Come* (Elastic Press), was nominated for various awards without actually managing to win any of them. However, it did generate numerous reviews and interviews, some of which are still knocking about on the web. Type 'Tim Lees' into your search engine, but bear in mind he is *not* Tim Lees the champion skier, nor the Scottish expert in reproductive medicine. (Ah! More's the pity.)



Doug Sirois: Upon my first reading of 'Preachers' I couldn't get the image of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* out of my head. This is my homage to that painting. It was a great pleasure creating this image.

PREACHERS by TIM LEES
illustrated by DOUGLAS A. SIROIS



We lived out on the farms when I was young. My Dad was a mechanic, and a good one, too; 'the last and best,' he called himself. I reckoned there was nothing that he couldn't fix back then. He'd make a gasket out of kitchen scraps, a fan belt from a strip of rag – and he'd have made some money, too, if he'd have only settled down and kept away from trouble for a while. But that was Dad for you: he never could.

It was the same each time. New town, new folk... That's great, he'd say. Just great.

He'd get up before dawn. Each place had something different, something broken or abandoned, some old lump of scrap he'd go at like a sculptor at a block of stone. There was a stubbornness in damaged things, he said. You had to find it, tease it out, to make them work for you. I never saw him happier than fiddling with an ancient dynamo, a tractor engine, or that old microlite we found one time. Those were the best days, sure enough.

They'd never last. Sooner or later, anywhere we went, his mood would change. Whatever pleasure he'd discovered there would leak away, leaving him secretive and tetchy, itchy with complaints. His boss was robbing him, he'd say. He worked for idiots. He was a skilled man, a mechanic, and they gave him peasants' jobs – herding the cows, mending the fence... They didn't know his worth. Or else they knew it, and they hated him because of it – they envied him...

He'd act as proud as Caesar then, and listening, you'd think the whole world was in league against him. Which in certain ways, it was.

One thing he didn't say. He must have known it, though. For every year that passed, it seemed that there were fewer things to fix. Fewer machines, and fewer cars; fewer of everything.

We'd pass the wrecks beside the road, their windscreens gone, their carcasses all chewed with rust, and Dad would say the same thing, every time. "I'd put that right."

He only had to glance to pass a verdict.

"They're fools, leaving it there. Give 'em a year, they'll kill for stuff like that. They'll kill for it. But you look now. They'd rather let it rot." He shook his head and sneered. "You know what's wrong with folk like that, eh, Matty boy? We know, don't we? You and me?" He leaned up close, so I could smell the sweat and motor-grease that clung to him, and breathed into my ear: "Gut trouble with their brains," he said. "Trouble – up top," and he raised one long, thin finger,

jabbing at his forehead with such vigour I was genuinely worried that he'd hurt himself.

My Dad had power over machines. In those days it seemed limitless, and if he told me he could make the old cars run, then I believed him. It was only later I began to doubt.

There was a wreck we'd pass on one of our most frequent trips. My Dad called it a Volks. It fascinated me. The shape was different, curved and pleasing, like a snail. We rode past in the buggy and I begged for him to fix it, time and time again. I begged for him to make it work.

He wouldn't, though. "Why bother?" And he'd flick the reins, dismissively. "We don't need that. We don't need anything."

Then one day when I asked, he didn't answer, and I knew I mustn't ask again.

There was a threshold with him that you didn't cross, not if you'd any sense. He never hit me – never needed to – but he'd got a look, a tone of voice, more brutal than a blow could ever be. And far worse, I worried if I angered him he'd class me with the others, with the wasters and the fools, the ones who'd got the trouble with their brains. That, I don't believe I could have borne.

Back at the farm, we'd got the Sergeant. So he called himself. He wore a uniform, alright, but Dad said it was so much patches now you couldn't tell just what it was. His tools hung on a rope around his waist. They rattled when he walked. Wrenches, spanners, hacksaw blades... He couldn't use them, Dad said. Didn't have the skill. The Sergeant was a fool. He didn't even own the farm, he'd just been hired like everybody else, so all his airs and graces didn't amount to anything, or not in Dad's eyes, anyway.

We stayed – how long? A year? Six months? No way of knowing, now.

They quarrelled.

It was petty, stupid – but then I knew Dad. It didn't take a lot to get his goat by then. For weeks, he'd gone round grumbling to himself, growling at the sheer inanity of how the place was run. And here, they'd got him stacking wood! Another stupid bloody job! A waste, he said, a total waste. And when the Sergeant came to check on him, it gave him just the chance he'd waited for.

I don't know what he said. I wasn't close enough to hear. A few words, hissed out of the corner of his mouth. But I could see the Sergeant stiffen, and his head come forward, like a lizard hunting flies.

He started yelling, right away. Started to fume and rant.

I thought my Dad would yell straight back, but he did something much, much smarter, and more calculated to annoy.

He suddenly went deaf.

It was a lovely mime, a gem; the way he looked around, then stuck a finger in his ear and waggled it. He knew people were watching him. He put his head on one side, bashed it with his fist. He cupped a hand around his ear, then finally, just giving up, he shrugged and walked away, leaving the wood half-stacked, the Sergeant turning purple in the face behind him.

Not that Dad seemed too concerned.

He called me to our room. He feigned a yawn; then winked at me.

"Make us some tea there, Matty boy. Looks like he's given us the day off."

He sat down, put his feet up, trying to relax. His eyes shut but the lids twitched and I saw his eyeballs move behind them, while his fingers clenched and opened, clenched and opened, half a dozen times.

I didn't say a word.

A few days later, and the petrol disappeared. Not much, that time – a can or two, that's all – but it was valuable, alright. The Sergeant had his bosses, too. He'd got accounts to reckon up and bills to pay. It worried him. He sent us out into the fields and on the roads, searching, as if he thought we'd find it in a ditch somewhere, when everybody knew that it was simply an excuse to get us out so he could snoop around our rooms. He didn't find a thing, of course. And nor did we.

Dad chuckled to himself.

"That's just the Sergeant for you," he told everyone. "There's nothing missing. Never was. Damn fool *can't count* is all."

He said the last part low, in confidence, like it was some great secret only he'd had brains to figure out; and then he grinned, and spat, and ground the spit into the dirt under his shoe.

Life wasn't easy on the farms.

The world had changed, these last few years. Even Dad said that.

Some days the wind blew from the west, and then we'd hide ourselves. Out in the fields, we'd pull our hoods over our heads and wrap our faces and our hands. We'd hunker down behind the hedgerows, stop work early and go home. The wind put thoughts into your skull. It made your mind run off in strange new ways – it drove you mad, so people said, or next best thing. I'd seen a man fall to the ground and babble in a language no one knew. I'd watched

a whole town just down tools and walk away across the fields, leaving their homes, their livestock – all because the wind had put some notion in their heads and they'd neither the power nor reason to resist. Those things I saw. Still others, I just heard about: the miracles, the signs, the travellers' tales; a boy of twelve caught in a rapture so intense he soared into the air, ten, twenty, thirty feet, depending who you listened to. My Dad just laughed at that, of course, so I laughed too, though secretly, I wondered how it felt to fly, to sail over the rooftops, look down on the wretched little farm buildings and frazzled fields, coming to rest in somewhere far away, somewhere clean and new and bright... Even then, I think I longed for that.

The farms were dying. Slowly, bit by bit, just like the engines that my Dad would try and mend. He'd fix them up, they'd break, he'd fix them up again, and on and on till there was nothing left. And that's the way the earth was, too, these days. You'd plant, get crops, or maybe just a few thin tubers, a spray of leaves, a little sickly fruit... or nothing, like as not. Some towns had magic men to say their spells over the soil, or dug in fertilizers, but they never helped for long. The land wouldn't play fair. It wouldn't work for us. Spring came, and we'd get cattle born with shrunken limbs, or defects in their eyes and other organs. Once I saw a calf, new-born, and all its guts were hanging out like worms. It wasn't dead. It kept on stumbling round, catching its hooves up in its bloody entrails, bleating all the time... Creatures like that, we burnt. Each spring you saw the plumes of smoke on every farm, you smelt the stink where the deformed and broken were destroyed.

It was in spring the Preachers came.

They drove a big black truck and flew a jet-black flag. They blared the horn. They shouted and demanded, yelled and sang; a dozen men, all weathered and unkempt, their vestments patched, festooned with rosaries and bandoleers. They dressed like priests, but swaggered round like gangsters – and they all wore guns. In some places, we'd heard, they'd burned the churches, crucified the ministers, scattered the congregations far and wide. We weren't religious, but even so, it was a reputation no one cared to test.

They made the Sergeant cancel work and call for an assembly in the yard. The day was bright and chilly, full of expectation; just the break in the routine had been enough to bring a sense of carnival, a hint of fever to the air. Only the Sergeant looked uneasy. His shoulders hunched,

his lips twitched. The Preachers had just marched in, stolen his authority, and he'd done nothing. Now he skulked, hung back, and wouldn't meet our eyes.

My Dad stood with a cigarette clamped in his jaw. It wasn't lit. But now and then he'd chew on it, and then the thing would wag about in an intriguing, ruminative kind of way. He didn't care for what was being said, that didn't interest him a bit, but there was something on his mind, alright. I knew that much.

The Preachers took their turns addressing us, this one hissing and upbraiding, that one with a little humour at the farm's expense. It was the last man, though, who stole the show, the one we were all talking about afterwards.

I'd seen him in the shadows, tall and gaunt, wild-eyed, pacing, wringing his hands, incapable of standing still. He leapt onto the truck-bed like a beast out of a cage. He stalked and strutted. He reached up with his long, long arms, as if to pull the sky down on our heads. His forehead shone with sweat. And then he'd scowl, crouch low and glare into our eyes, accusingly. Or turn his back and make us wait, only to spin around and rail against us. It was like a dance, a ritual. He caught us up in it, unwilling, helpless partners; and half the time I didn't even like to look at him, but somehow, I still didn't dare to look away.

He talked. Oh, how he talked! About the great city of God that they were building in the south, the city with its four great gates and four great avenues that shone like pearl, a city consecrated with the blood of men and beasts, with living hearts torn beating from the flesh; each road, each brick, each pediment and pillar, every stair and stone now sanctified and dedicated to the Lord – for what was God, he asked? Some meek, mild, *idle* thing, to nod and wink at all our failings? Was God a friend, to reassure, and back us up? A servant, to be called upon in times of need? Was God our slave, to do with as we wished?

He paused, he stretched himself out, tall and thin, he gazed up at the sky, and then the answer burst from him like gunshots: *No! No! No!* He whirled, his robes fanned out; it seemed the wind was in his head and wouldn't let him go. People were right, back in the olden days, he cried. God *wanted* death. He *wanted* it. He was the wolf that bit, the wasp that stung, the maggot that consumed the flesh. God wasn't meek! God wasn't mild! Look at Creation, look at all its fangs and claws! God was the eater, the

devourer to be kept at bay with bribes and sops. The ancients knew it – the Greeks, the Hebrews and the Aztecs. But not us: we'd let ourselves forget, we'd made ourselves a new God, a namby-pamby, mollycoddling God, a nursery God... And we were paying for it. Yes. For God still made demands, whether we heard or not. God required His sacrifice. And what we didn't give Him from our own free will, why then, the Preacher said, his eyes like terrible black holes – why then, God *took*.

And he looked out towards the fields, the little plumes of smoke that drifted in the cool spring light, the pyres on which we'd burned those beasts born broken and unfit for life, and he nodded, just the once.

Dad's foot drew patterns in the dirt. He wasn't listening exactly, but he was interested in something; and from time to time, a little smile would creep across his face, like someone reckoning up secret means.

The meeting broke up in a hubbub. Everyone was talking. People flocked around the Preachers, full of questions. But Dad lounged slyly by the barn door, his thumbs tucked in his belt, his foot tapping the ground. A minute or two later and he ambled over to the truck, as if taking a mild, professional interest, and struck up conversation with the driver, a young man with a scraggy beard and fingers missing on his left hand. They spoke a while, away from everybody else. Then Dad gave me a nod. "Back to work, now, Matty." That was all he said. He hadn't been so cheerful about work now in a long, long time.

The Preachers stayed two days.

It was the final night they made their move – my Dad, the driver, maybe someone else, as well. I didn't see. I woke up in the dark and heard their voices, low down, and the door shut and the faint, faint shuffling of their footsteps on the track outside.

I tried to stay awake, to hear them coming back, but when I woke again it was already dawn, and Dad was snoring in his bunk, as if he'd never been away. I might have thought I'd dreamed it, but I knew from past experience just what must have gone on.

The Preachers left. A couple of the men went with them, men who'd got no families to hold them back. Dad didn't see them off. He'd got no time for all that guff, he said.

Alone then, in our room, he pulled a wad of notes out of his pockets, wrapped them up in polythene, and pushed them in the gap between the wardrobe and the wall.

He winked at me. I knew that wink. It meant 'our secret'.

It meant, too, that he'd enlisted me in one more private war. I was his co-conspirator, his soldier, his army and his audience.

He wanted my approval, I can see that now, as surely as I needed his. But at the time, I only felt a deep and queasy recognition that, once again, we were about to leave.

.....
Dad really did it with the Sergeant after that.

Covert victories just weren't enough for him. He always had to gloat.

Of course, they found the petrol gone the first time anyone went to the store. It seemed astonishing the Sergeant hadn't checked straight off, the moment that the Preachers left. We knew he didn't trust them. Though then again, perhaps he wasn't such a fool as Dad made out; if he'd done that, he might have been obliged to follow them, to try to get it back, and wound up dead as a result.

Already, he'd lost face. Now he was gunning for a victim, some way to regain respect. He stalked around the farm. He yelled. He shouted till his face went scarlet. And to Dad, in that state, he was irresistible.

Everyone was crowding round the store, watching the place the drums had been. But it was Dad stepped forward, very scientific, very solemn and intense. He'd got that same abstracted air I'd seen when he was dealing with some faulty item of machinery.

All eyes were on him, and he knew it, too.

He knelt down to inspect the ground. He pointed out the drag marks. He looked for clues in the remaining drums. He ran his hands over the turf, then straightened up, looked at his fingertips. He sniffed them, tentatively. "Smells like petrol, maybe."

The Sergeant had been watching all this time. I saw the muscle twitching in his stubbled cheek.

Dad thrust his fingers right under the Sergeant's nose. "Petrol...?" he said.

The Sergeant sniffed.

"...or cow shit?" said my Dad, and threw his head back, and he laughed.

.....
It was our last day on the farm.

Dad said he'd had it with these idiots, these country hicks. Maybe the Preachers weren't so bad, he said. That's where the money was, these days, in any case – down south. Who cared what they believed? He'd worked for worse, no doubt of that.

We packed up quickly. That's one job we'd had practice at. He took the money and he hid it in the secret pockets sewn inside his pants.

The sun was bright but cold, like an enormous chunk of ice, and as we walked,

our breath steamed in the morning air.

The journey was the worst we'd ever done. Sometimes we'd go for hours without a ride; and then a truck or van or cart would take us maybe ten, twelve miles – that's all. Like Dad said, once we could have made the trip in no time flat, back in the good old days. Not now.

We spent the first night by the roadside, shivering and cold. Dad grumbled to himself. I heard him, every time I woke. When morning came, he told me he'd slept wonderfully, like a log. I didn't bother arguing. His eyes were ringed, his face was pale and gaunt. He swore, and slapped his chest, his legs, to bring the warmth back, and I copied him, only it didn't help.

A thin grey drizzle filled the air. The country here was wild and empty. We had money, but no food. We passed by ruins, shattered houses, road signs pointing off to non-existent towns. Graffiti daubed the walls, signs of the zodiac, crosses and circles, other, complicated symbols that I didn't recognise.

I couldn't walk. My feet moved under me, they made a rhythm, but it didn't feel like walking any more. Sometimes I'd stumble. Dad grabbed me by the arm and helped me up. He let me cling to him. But still he wouldn't stop.

At last, after what seemed like hours, both of us chilled and soaked through to the bone, we saw a field ahead with workers busy planting. In between the crops, totems were raised: tall poles, draped with ribbons, crowned with carvings in the form of snake heads, weird parodies of skulls and animal shapes. How my spirits soared! New strength came into me. Here, at last, we could buy food – perhaps stay over for a few nights. They'd have machines to mend, if we were lucky. Something that would interest him. And shelter, warmth...

As we drew closer, though, a single figure stepped out of the field towards us. His long damp robes hung limp on him, and from them he produced an object which he seemed to offer us, held between his outspread hands: a fat grey sock, lumpily stuffed and lazily gyrating in his grasp. I watched it for a moment till I realised what it was: a snake. He put it to his shoulder, stroked it like a favoured pet, and let it crawl, its long, slow mass seeking the refuge of his robes, the sweet heat of his skin.

Dad didn't pause. I tugged his sleeve. We passed the workers and the snake man, who stood beckoning, a trance-like smile upon his face. But Dad just yelled at everyone, suddenly furious, "Yokels!

Fucking yokels!" and he spat into the rain, his face all twisted with contempt.

He walked straight by. They called, they asked us who we were, where we were going, but he hunched his shoulders and he went on, and the rain ran down his face and it was like he couldn't see or hear them, like they just didn't exist.

.....
All that was years ago. Things change. The west wind still brings strangeness to our lives, but nowadays we're more accepting, and see its influence as gifts: the gift of Prophecy, the gift of Tongues, the gift of Knowledge of the Mind of God. Such matters have a place in law, and in the city's constitution; although truth to tell, the greater number of us still go hooded when the west wind blows. Caution's not an easy lesson to unlearn. It may well be, as we are told, as I myself profess, given my calling, that the west wind brings the thoughts of God, blown here for our enlightenment; or else the wind is God Himself. Or else, as others whisper, that the wind is nothing but a madness, a contagion carried on the air, and... No. Such views are dangerous even to contemplate, much less write down.

These are the new ways. My father never took to them. Right to the end he'd gone around collecting bits of metal, rusty tools, old parts of engines and electric goods. He always planned to use them, build something... He never did.

"There's kids now never even seen a car," he'd say. "I'll show 'em one. I'll show 'em how it was. If I can get –" and then he reeled off a great list of parts he needed, things he wanted me to find for him, somehow. I said, "Come on, Dad. I'm a priest, not an antiques dealer. No one's got stuff like that. Not any more."

It didn't stop him dreaming, though. Even when the fire had died in him, the arrogance and vigour of his younger days. Even when he walked round stooped and bent-up, and the black moods came more often, even then he'd still have some small mechanism ticking in his mind, some place he kept on making plans.

He wasn't a believer. Couldn't manage it, he said. And so I sacrificed for him, the day he died, to try and win some mercy for his soul.

It was the saddest thing I've ever done. A death for Death. A soul for Souls. An ox, a ram, a golden cockerel, each 'without blemish', as the Scripture says.

And hard to find, these days, I'm telling you. ▣

Tim Akers grew up in deeply rural North Carolina, but has spent about half his life near Chicago. He is the last in a long line of gold prospectors, bank managers, tourist trap barons, newspaper editors and theologians. He is trying to do them all proud at once, with mixed results. His electronic self can usually be found at dead-channel.net.



Doug Sirois: 'Toke' was a pleasure for me to illustrate because it is essentially a horror story. It was a challenge to create two characters that are both monsters in their own right. My favorite part is the flowers for eyes on the creature.

TOKE by TIM AKERS illustrated by DOUGLAS A. SIROIS

Barber was an ugly kid. His face was wrinkled with scars, a swarming mass that crawled up his neck, across his cheek and on up into his hair like puckered vines. It had something to do with his dead parents, I knew. Not something he talked about. Anyway, it was his idea to harvest that scarecrow.

"Sure," he said, rubbing his scalp where the scars left his head spottily bald. "It's not a big deal. You crack the root and smoke the vines. Best high you'll ever have."

"Yeah, but," Paul shrugged, splayed his hands. "I've never. I mean. Killed anyone."

"Killed? Killed, Paul?" Barber snorted. "It's not a someone. Something, more like it."

"I suppose. Still. I don't know."

"You're scared, Paul?" Matsy giggled and punched him.

"How do you know about this? Where'd you hear?" I asked.

Barber smiled, the lines of his face crumpling red. "C'mon Tenner, you know. I know things. Heh. No, it's something I saw upriver."

"So you've done this. Seen it done?" Paul asked.

Barber rubbed his face again, then looked out over the street. "Not exactly, no. It's sort of a ritual upriver. Fewer scarecrows. Only the bosses, the gang leaders, get the toke. And only a little." He smiled a thin smile and nodded. "But it gets done. It happens."

"Huh. I've never heard of it. Around

here, I mean." I didn't know much outside the city. Veridon was a big city, though.

"Sure. Like I said. I know things. Been places you've never been, city boy."

That was absolutely true, for what it was worth. Barber liked to brag about his childhood spent in the trading caravans far south, beyond the massive waterfall that lay at the feet of Veridon. He had spent those years among the inhuman races, where his parents had died, where he had lost everything. Fled back to Veridon and then upriver to the lesser towns. Away from the inhuman races, the anansi, the janggala. The scarecrows, too.

"So, we're up for it? A little fun?" Barber looked at each of us, his eyes bright. He looked angry. Matsy was ready, of course. I wasn't against it. We turned to Paul.

He dug his eyes into the ground.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay."

"Okay. Let's get started. Let's get high." Barber smiled.

.....
We started in the old city, between the grimy brick teeth of the Founder's Towers. Seemed like a good place. Plenty of scarecrows, usually, among the rich, but the streets were narrow and crowded. We stood out, dirty kids on expensive pavement, so we moved on.

Barber had this wicked steel hatchet that hung from his belt. It slapped against his leg when he walked. Soon as we started the hunt, out came that hatchet. We stalked the

narrow streets of Veridon, Paul, Matsy and me, with Barber in the lead. He was hefting that blade and grinning.

"Best high, Tenner." He looked at me with wild blue eyes and smiled. "You wait and see if it ain't."

We found our scarecrow at the Brother's Crossing down in Three Stars. Three Stars was an artists' district. Rich patrons and snotty poets, that sort of thing. Probably someone paying it to rub shoulders. It was very fashionable, I hear, to have exotic friends.

We spent a lot of time not looking at it. Just a glimpse, now and then. We watched it for about an hour, lurking outside the bar, avoiding the watchful whisper-quiet agents of the King's Badge. Finally, it packed in for the night, said its goodbyes and paid its tab. It paid by shaving off a plug of its arm, a twisted bundle of green vine. The bartender smiled and packed the toke into a leather bag.

"There, see?" Barber hissed. "It's worth money. Money. Not everyone knows about it, sure. But there's your proof."

"Oh? Uh, so we don't have to kill him, then? We could, you know, just cut some off? Right?" Paul asked.

Barber fixed him in his eyes, scratched the scar on his cheek, then turned away and spit. "It, Paul. We're killing it."

The rest of us nodded.

It walked out onto the street and turned north. We followed.



The Torchlight was behind us, the cluster of zeps around its docks drifting like lazy, dim moons against the stars. The city ambled gently down, and we went with it, loping past the terraced steppes of houses and factories, the iron jaws of Badgeholds. We kept our heads down.

Paul, Matsy and me, we don't do any killing. Mule work, mostly, for the gangs running fern out of the Torchlight, or smuggling out of the Reine-side quays. There was good work for kids our age; old enough to work, young enough to be pitied and ignored. We used Matsy as a honeypot, once. Lured some old pervert into a rented room near the Dunje, then beat him unconscious and took his purse and the bag of candy he used as bait. But never murder. It was hard for us to think of scarecrows as people though, you know. They just didn't. Well. They didn't seem like people. It didn't seem bad to kill them. To us, at least.

They killed themselves, in fact. Each other. Not out of anger or money or any of the normal reasons for killing. I saw a 'crow once, a sick looking thing. Half of its torso and both arms had turned bad, the usual green replaced by grass so dry it was almost white. It was walking down the street, and two of its fellow plants walked up and hacked it up. Tore out the bits that were dead, disassembled the wooden skeleton and planted the rest of it in a clay pot by the side of the road. Cold, like they were taking apart a puzzle. It had screamed the whole time.

Still, we were nervous as we followed our scarecrow up the Saddle March, through Bellingrow and into the Harper's District. We kept quiet, cycling who was keeping tabs on the 'crow, the rest of us hanging back. Trying to blend into the festive night time crowds. There were too many people here, so we waited. Barber tapped his fingers on the broad head of his hatchet. That got a few stares, but what did we care?

We got almost to the banks of the Dunje before our prey sniffed us out. It must have been drunk to not have seen us before then. Do scarecrows get drunk? I don't know. When we were sitting outside the bar, watching it through the bottleglass windows while we waited, I never saw it take a drink. Had never seen any of them drink or eat or anything. It paid for something, though, so maybe it was drunk. Drunk and careless.

Near the Dunje the crowds thinned to nothing. By rules, the Dunje is a bad border. Beyond it lie the city's factories,

and at its mouth is the largest of Veridon's three Reine-side harbors. It's a dangerous place at night. Even we were nervous to be there, and we had our minds on killing someone. Something. Harvesting.

Our target paused beneath a friction lamp, maybe to check its watch, and that was the first really good look I got at it. It was tall, thin in the chest but thick in the arms and legs. Naked except for a leather belt and harness for carrying stuff. Its skin looked like bundled hay. It glanced back at us. Its eyes were clustered flowers. We stopped dead in the street and pretended to be interested in the closed stores on either side. We'd gotten too close, too anxious. It ran. We followed, Barber in the front. Matsy was giggling into her hand.

I'd never seen a scarecrow run. Must be all that time they spent with roots, before they got their skeletons. It didn't run well.

We caught it in less than a block. Barber hit it first, Paul and me right behind. The 'crow wasn't heavy, and the four of us went down, skidding into the curb. When we hit the ground, its skin rasped like a sandstorm. Matsy danced around us,

was grim, the thin lines of his scar red on his tight jaw. We could barely see him, perched above the scarecrow's wooden skeleton. The thing's whole fibrous body had let go and was now flailing against the boy and his hatchet. Barber struggled, swinging his blade, cutting out huge tufts of plant, chopping into the skeleton. Barber was screaming now, too, short angry gasps that were sometimes cut off as whirling tendrils plugged his mouth. Between strikes he was spitting names like fire. "Handrew. Mark. Tassy. Gehr." Chop, cut, hack. "Petr." Hack. "Petr." Hack. "Petr."

His eyes were shiny with tears, the swings of his hatchet wild and strong. We were terrified. Barber had always scared us a little, but we had never seen him like this. We had never seen his anger so bright, burning through his eyes.

"Cogsdamn, Barber," Matsy whispered. "What in holy hell?"

Paul put a hand on her arm. We drew away, but Barber didn't notice.

Finally, rapidly, Barber drove the hatchet into the scarecrow's chest. There was a sharp crack as the blade splintered the

I'd never seen a scarecrow run. Must be all that time they spent with roots, before they got their skeletons. It didn't run well

kicking and laughing.

The scarecrow started to scream, its voice a high, grassy whisper. Paul wrapped himself around the 'crow's legs, while Barber and I wrestled with its arms. Barber pinned it to the street, then started taking short swings with the hatchet. He had trouble getting leverage, and kept bringing the blunt end down, or hitting at an angle so that the head bounced off the tough fiber of the scarecrow's chest or arm. One swing came too close, and I stumbled back and away, bowling into Matsy. Finally, though, Barber freed his arm from the struggling 'crow and brought the hatchet down solidly.

With a howl, the 'crow abandoned its artificial skeleton and swarmed over Barber. The wooden arm, hinged with metal, clattered onto the cobbled street. The shoulder and chest disappeared in the whirling green and tan maelstrom of the panicked bush. The leafy fibers that had recently held the arm together snaked across Barber's chest and battered his head. Paul yelped as the legs writhed and dissolved into hundreds of grassy whips. Matsy and I stepped back, horrified.

Barber was at the center of it. His face

'crow's heart basket. Barber belted down again and again, yelling. The scarecrow spasmed, writhing and whipping its tendrils around the street. Dark clumps of sod started to fly with each blow of Barber's axe, and suddenly the 'crow was still. Another blow of the hatchet, a muffled squelch, and silence. He had shattered the scarecrow's root.

Barber's face was sketched with bloody lines crossing his old scars and smearing his cheeks in red. He sat on top of the scarecrow's wooden chest, tore a clump of dead grass out of the root and tamped it into a pipe he had slipped from his pocket. He snarled at us, out of breath.

"Toke up, you useless fucks," he said, and we did.

The night was a blur. Barber smoked viciously. He kept carving bits of the 'crow off and pushing his pipe onto us. I kept wondering what kind of hangover you got from a dead scarecrow, but the higher I got the harder I smoked.

Paul and Matsy disappeared early, and Barber and I spent some time together. He was incoherent. At one point he sat with the

scarecrow's eyeflower cupped in the palm of his hand, stroking it and plucking petals.

"They start fires, Ten. Hell big fires."

"What?" I asked. I was slumped against the wall in Matsy's flop, trying to stay upright.

"Out there, on the plains. Poison fires. Killed mom and dad, my friends. My brother, Petr. And the damn poison made me sick. Made me ugly." He traced a finger down his face.

"Your scars?" I asked, nursing the pipe.

"The smoke grew something in my skin. Vines." He crushed the flower, then snatched the pipe from my hand and tamped in more of the 'crow. "Who's smoking now, grassman? Who is it?" He sparked up and inhaled deeply. His face was angry and sad and dark.

I woke up with a killer cough. My chest hurt every time I hacked. It felt like a god of mucus had his eternal fingers laced through my ribcage, and was shaking his way out. My head hurt, too. I thought I might still be high from the 'crow, the way my head was spinning. It hadn't been the

other last night. Apparently it involved mucus.

Matsy was ghost white when she opened the door. She was breathing heavily, her mouth open. "Barber's sick," she wheezed. "Really bad sick."

"You don't sound so good yourself."

She coughed, and it sounded a lot worse than me. How bad was Barber, then?

Bad. He was curled into a ball on the common bed. A thin, clear ring of snot lined his mouth. He shuddered with every breath. He wasn't really breathing, just coughing, in and out. Paul stood in the corner, rocking on his heels.

"God's Cogs, Mats. How long has he been liked this?"

"We don't know," Paul answered. "He was like this when we woke up. About an hour now."

"You've tried getting a doctor?"

Matsy shook her head. None of us had money for a doctor. Paul coughed, and it sounded like a hammer on jelly.

"You've got it, too?" I asked. "Do we all have it? Are we all going to end up like this?"

nothing black and curling and flopping like a fish out of water. Nothing to be scared of.

Every step I took, my cough got worse. It felt like my lungs were swelling in my chest, like they were filling with hot lead. Ribbons of mucus began to slop out of my mouth. I couldn't even cough properly anymore. I just hacked, and my lungs strained against my ribs. I stumbled the last block and leaned against Marshall's door, trying to catch my breath. I banged my head weakly against the door until it opened, then slumped against the frame.

"Oh, damn it all. Tenner, you stupid brat." Marshall grabbed me by the collar and hauled me in, then slammed and locked the door. "How stoned are you? Idiot."

I curled into a ball on Marshall's floor and tried to catch my breath. I was breathing in tiny, gasping breaths that were full of liquid. I flipped Paul's stash out of my coat and pushed it to Marshall's feet, then started to cough.

"What the hell?" Marshall poked at the bag with his toe, blinking warily. His enormous face was slack and waxy. He twined his fingers across his belly and frowned. "What's the matter, boy?"

"Paul and Matsy," I croaked, then waved at my chest and mouth as coughing consumed me. "Barber too."

Marshall knelt and snagged the bag, giving it a cursory glance before he squinted at me. "Are they as bad as you?"

"Worse."

He grimaced and rubbed his face. "Okay then. You have money?"

I nodded to the stash in his hand. He raised his eyebrows and peered inside.

"Ah. Drugs. Yes, well. Drugs. Okay, let's have a look at you." He helped me up and into his claustrophobic house. I leaned on his table while he cleared off a stack of books, then I sat down.

"How long?" he asked, with his hand on my chest.

"This morning. Woke up this way"

"And the others?"

"Same." I curled over my chest and coughed for a solid minute. Most of me felt hot as coals, but my chest was cold like deep water. It didn't hurt as much, but that scared me more.

"Well," Marshall said after holding a hand to my chest and listening to my breathing. "It looks bad, Ten. Expensive bad. Let's see what sort of treatment you and your wayward friends can afford." He picked up Paul's stash and shook it out onto the desk. It was quiet in his little room, my

best high, perhaps, but it was certainly the most thorough.

I rolled over and kicked the sheets onto the floor. My room stank. I had a flashburn memory of throwing up at some point last night, and determined to not explore the corners of the room too closely. My mouth was dry. I coughed, and something shifted against my sternum. Probably caught something from Matsy last night. Or Paul. Or something.

I got up and stumbled outside. The crowds on the March were milling about, buying lunch things and rushing about with purpose. My cough bought me a little personal space as I walked down to the quays, where Matsy and Paul lived. I crossed through Three Stars to get there, and felt a little awkward between its vogue window fronts. I wondered if our scarecrow's friends were looking for him yet.

Paul and Matsy had a cheap flop near Ebd Hook, the second largest of the city's harbors. The dirtiest, too. The stink of fish and stagnant prostitution started up three blocks before I got to their place.

I could hear the coughing outside. Typical. Cog knows what we'd done to each

We sat quietly, looking at Barber as he hacked and shook. A sudden spasm gripped him, and he began to cough like nothing I'd seen before. Something dark and thin flopped from his lips. He breathed in and it curled back into his head.

"God's fucking Cogs. What was that?" Paul stammered. He held both hands over his mouth.

"We've got to do something, Paulsie. We've got to." Matsy's voice was high and thin.

"I know a guy," I said. "Gimme your stash."

"We don't. There isn't any," Paul said.

"Your stash. Seriously."

Matsy shot Paul a look and then fished a burlap handsack from under the bed and tossed it to me. I felt a cough coming on, and held it down.

"I'll be back. Keep him. I don't know. Warm or something." I walked out the door and broke into a trot.

The street was twice as crowded, and everyone was staring. I ran as fast as I could, but my lungs gave out in less than a block. I knelt in an alley and coughed until I puked. I didn't look at what came out. There was nothing dark and thin in it,

heavy, wet breath the only sound.

"Ah," Marshall said. "Ah." I turned to look at him. He had a plug of scarecrow in his fingers.

"Oh, uh. Yeah. Barber."

Marshall looked at me. He dropped the plug and started to refill the bag. "You smoked this."

"Well, yeah. I mean. Yeah."

"Right. You know how they breed? The Guarana?"

"Who?"

"Scarecrows. How they breed."

"Oh, uh. No."

"Fire. On those great, wide plains downstream, over the Breaking Wall. They have these huge fires. Big as the city. Bigger."

"Okay," I said. That was a lot of fire. I had never been out of the city, much less downriver. The Reine was miles wide, and the waterfall it became was just as wide. The trade routes down to the plains below were rare, and the heart of Veridon's wealth.

"In the smoke. The smoke is their, it's their fucking seed, Tenner. And they grow in anything. Dirt, rocks. Wood." He closed the bag and smacked it into my chest.

"Flesh. Get out, Tenner."

"Barber said." I had a flash memory of his scars, the vines that had grown there. The poison smoke. "He said that he knew people who had done it."

Marshall nodded. "Sure. In tiny amounts you can smoke Guarana and survive. It's dangerous. It appeals to a certain reckless, criminal minority."

"We didn't know that, Marshall. Cogs, how much is too much?"

"However much you've smoked. Now, get the fuck out."

"Oh, fuck. Marshall. You've got to help me."

He shook his head. I'd never known Marshall to turn down drugs. "This is deep water, Ten. Deeper than I'm willing to swim. The crown takes killing crows very seriously." He pulled me up off the table and dragged me to his front door. "Drugs are one thing. Theft. Smuggling. But a scarecrow? No." He pulled the door open and strong-armed me into the street. "Good luck, Tenner. You stupid fuck."

.....
Matsy and Paul's door was open when I got back. The bed was a mess, and the floor looked like something had been dragged out of the room, but there was no one around. None of the valuables were missing. Not that any of it was that valuable. Still.

Didn't look like a theft. Maybe they got tired of waiting for me. Maybe the King's Badge had paid a visit. I fumbled the door closed, locked it, and collapsed onto the bed.

I was cold, especially my chest, but I was sweating. My lungs felt like they were struggling through mud, my breath squelching up in wet gasps, struggling. I folded into a ball and shivered. I could feel hot mucus sliding down my cheek.

The day passed. Sometimes I felt like I was sinking into the bed, like the edges of my skin were dissolving into the linen and sweat and sex in Paul and Matsy's flop. The cold anchor of my lungs dragged me down. I lay there and wheezed and waited for my lungs to fill up and crack my chest.

I did my share of cursing. Cursing Barber, cursing the scarecrow. I saw now, now that it was too late, the line that led from Barber's childhood, that tragedy, and my current condition. The poison smoke, the scars on his face, the anger that drove Barber to kill, the ignorance that made us part of it. Who did I hate more, Barber and his hate, or me and my stupidity.

Near dark, a sharp pain corkscrewed out

puke it out. Ten minutes of dry heaves and all I had was a slick pool of bile and blood dripping from my lips. Shivers took me, and a fever ran through my body. It was over. I was going to die, die in a sticky smear of phlegm, die when this thing outgrew my lungs and tore itself through my throat. The room spun around me on the axis of my head, the walls closing, the ceiling bending down.

As I slipped away I felt sorry for myself. Sorry for Paul and Matsy and even Barber, where they were. And, finally, I felt sorry for the scarecrow, for the guarana, for killing and dying and hate that I didn't really understand.

I closed my eyes and faded away, dreaming of grassy plains and silver white skies, and fire, fire that burned across the horizon, burned me until I was clean through and through.

.....
I woke up in tunnels. Laceworks of root dangled from the ceiling, and the walls were rough, raw earth. They were all around me, silent, their petal eyes twitching as they walked. A dozen of them,

A cold slug of mucus slid out of my mouth and onto the floor. Deep in the pit of my stomach, something snagged and held

of my chest and blossomed into a torrent of coughing. The shaking and spasms forced me to the edge of the bed, sharp lines of pain tearing through my ribcage, until I could feel things ripping, coming loose. I clattered off the bed and fell on all fours to the floor. I heaved, and the worst of the pain climbed up my throat and into my mouth.

A cold slug of mucus slid out of my mouth and onto the floor. Deep in the pit of my stomach, something snagged and held. My lips peeled back and a dark fist of black matter tumbled out and then hung from my jaw. I couldn't breathe, completely smothered by this weight struggling at the back of my throat. I tried to scream. The thing, the mass, dangled from deep inside me. It writhed, tiny leaves and blades of grass curling and lashing, all of it slick with mucus and blood. It looked like a pulsing heart of grass. And then, horribly, it returned. My lungs convulsed and it slithered back up and into my mouth. I felt it shamle moistly down my throat and lodge between my lungs. Tendrils slithered up my sinuses and tickled the back of my teeth.

I collapsed on the floor and tried to

two dozen, huddled around. They carried me like a basket, my wrists and feet held in hands dry as haystacks. The air was cold. I could hardly breathe.

There was momentary hope. This many crows, this was more than in all of Veridon. We must be outside the city, I thought. I'd never been outside, not even briefly. Maybe Marshall had a turn of heart and contacted some representative of the Grass Caucus. Maybe they had collected me, and would now clear out the thing in my chest. Harvest it from my lungs. Maybe.

We entered a room. The ceiling was low, hardly higher than the wispy heads of my procession. Something glowed. In the walls and ceiling, there were long gutters filled with a liquid that pulsed and flickered like the sun. It was an impossible contrast, the dark earth walls huddled around tiny canals of melted sun, flowing between the roots.

I craned my head to see it all, and hope faded. The room was huge and filled with grass. It seemed to be a plain below the earth, a narrow horizon of green beneath a muddy sky supported by pillars of dirt and brick. Brickwork and metal pipes poked out from the ceiling, and I realized

that we weren't outside of the city at all. We were somewhere under the streets and between the three rivers of Veridon. I wondered, briefly, which district had been so compromised.

My bearers were walking waist high through grass. The blades touched my back, dragging sharp fingers over my spine, rustling as we passed. It was a marvelous place. A horrible place.

There were three ceramic pots, as tall as my chest, filled with tamped earth. They sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by crows. Glass bowls of the sunshine water hung above them, suspended from the close ceiling. There was a fourth pot, empty.

They pitched me in, then arranged me so my head was up. I tried to stand, but one of them held me down. The inside of the pot was cool and chalky. The one who held me put a hand on each shoulder until I stopped struggling. He looked at me with his cornflower eyes and leaned close.

"You'll remember," he breathed.

I didn't understand. I still don't. But I remember. The dirt was damp as they shoveled it in. The one with his hands on

my shoulders didn't move, until the fever and rising dirt prevented my escape. Cold soil hugged my chest and throat. It filled my mouth in gasping breaths, until there was nothing but blackness and the warm taste of tilled fields.

The first thing they did when we hatched from our clay shells, after they planted us in our own wooden skeletons, was destroy the one that had been Barber. No smoke, no fire, just a cold grinding blackness that ate through him. Left him empty.

And still today, I remember. I don't know when I died and when I was born anew, where I stopped being one thing and became this other. I don't know which one is Matsy, which petal-white eyes belong to Paul. I could ask, but it doesn't seem to matter anymore. Above all, though, I remember. Not just my life, the petty crime and pretty girls. I remember the one I killed, we killed. His life. He was an ambassador to the city from the far plains, out on his night off. More, too, going back to the wide fields of home, going back leafy generations. I remember wild fields and silver white skies, and fire, fire that burned me clean. ■

PODZONE: SF TO GO PAUL S. JENKINS

Podcasting has been around for over two years, but if you ask someone who's heard of it you're quite likely to get one of the following reactions: "I can't listen to podcasts – I don't have an iPod;" "Podcasting? That's just another name for internet radio."

Wrong, and wrong. Many who listen to podcasts do so without an iPod, or an MP3 player of any kind. They listen on their computer, or burn the audio files to CD, then listen in the car or on the hifi.

As for podcasting being the same as internet radio – it is and it isn't. Internet radio is something you listen to on a computer, by browsing to a website and clicking on a link. You can do this with most podcasts too. What makes podcasting different, and so convenient, is the use of a podcatching program, also known as an aggregator, which allows you to select which podcasts you want to hear regularly. The program will then automatically download each new episode to your hard disk, as it becomes available, with no need for you to do anything other than actually listen to it. If you do have an MP3 player, whether it's an iPod or some other brand, the podcatching program will transfer the new episodes to your player just by connecting it to the computer.

Why would you want to do this anyway? Well, as a science fiction fan you might find the BBC's output insufficient. BBC7, available on digital radio (DAB), Freeview, cable, satellite and online, has a daily SF spot called the 7th Dimension – but it's mostly old shows. There are scores of podcasts that discuss the kind of SF that people are consuming today, and they're completely free. All you need in order to hear them is a computer, a broadband internet connection and a podcatching program.

If you have a Macintosh computer you probably already have iTunes, which has been podcast-friendly since version 4.9 (and it's free to download, for Mac or Windows, whether or not you have a previous version: www.apple.com/itunes/download).

So, if you have your computer switched on, connected to broadband internet, and you've downloaded and installed your podcatcher (iTunes, or something else), what science-fiction podcasts are available? iTunes has a searchable directory, but you might like to start with these two:

Slice of SciFi (www.sliceofscifi.com),

weekly, 40–60 minutes: Michael R. Mennenga, Evo Terra and Summer Brooks bring you interviews with current SF film and TV stars and the latest news of media-related science fiction.

Escape Pod (www.escapepod.org), weekly, up to 50 minutes: If you're interested in shows that contain SF, rather than those that are about SF, this is the show for you – actual science fiction short stories, read just like audiobooks, often featuring well-known authors such as Robert J. Sawyer and Nancy Kress. Escape Pod is (uniquely in podcasting) a paying market for short SF – see the submission guidelines on the website, which also has an excellent guide to subscribing to podcasts (www.escapepod.org/podcasting).

Later columns will cover what's available in specific sub-genres – there are shows about *Doctor Who*, *Babylon 5*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Firefly*, *Serenity*, *Heroes*... this is a long list. There are also shows about written SF, and about writing SF.

Most podcasts originate in the US, but there are plenty from other parts of the world, including some from dedicated UK podcasters. Once you start exploring podcasts, you'll find there are shows that deal with virtually every subject imaginable. Quality can be variable, in both sound and content, but you have the choice to listen or not. All podcatchers have an 'unsubscribe' button.

If you like audiobooks, but you're horrified by the prices charged for unabridged readings, you could try **Podiobooks.com**. This is a site where you can 'subscribe' (for free) to receive automatic downloads, one chapter at a time, of audiobooks that have been produced by the books' authors. Many of the eighty or so titles are science fiction. Some are works in progress, others are complete. (Here I must declare an interest: my own first novel, *The Plitone Revisionist*, is available as a podiobook from www.podiobooks.com.)

Podcasting continues to expand, but it's still largely experimental, as podcasters discover what works and what doesn't. More video podcasts are becoming available, but most are audio only, and there are thousands to choose from.

Paul S. Jenkins has produced **The Rev Up Review** podcast (www.revupreview.co.uk) since March 2005

“Proudly made in the East End of London”, says the end of Danny Boyle’s *Sunshine*, just ahead of the Lottery Funded logo. As the first British space movie for a generation, *Sunshine* is all too aware that it’s on a one-shot mission not just to rekindle the classical deep-space movie but to demonstrate the possibility of doing internationally competitive FX spectacle from a shed in Limehouse. The money, of course, is still largely Hollywood, and at first glance you might reasonably wonder where the Britishness lies in this systematic homage to Boyle’s pantheon of space-movie classics 2001, *Solaris*, *Dark Star*, *Silent Running*, and *Alien*. Its characters are all either white American, Cillian Murphy and Rose Byrne here included, or Sino-Japanese, in fair anticipation of the coming geopolitical order. The plot points are constructed quite deliberately from familiar set pieces out of Hollywood space-mission movies, and even the classically British scenario of meteorological apocalypse – the sun has caught a nasty cold from a plug of dark matter and has to be bombed back to life – owes little to our noble native tradition of catastrophe fiction, set as it is entirely in space with only one brief scene of the benighted earth at the end.

The most overt assertion of Britishness is a negative: the rejection of Hollywood studio requirements like stars, uplift, and mushy astrotheology. Certainly one of the most attractive things about *Sunshine* is its mischievous repeated threats to open its airlocks to transcendent cosmic encounters, only to reveal each time that what we’re dealing with is the explosive conjunction of fissile human minds with the big cosmic detonator. Anyone expecting God, sparkly aliens, or some kind of godlike solar intelligence to swing down on the machine and sort us out is in for a welcome disappointment. But while *Sunshine* is firm about what it wants not to be, it’s squidgier about what it wants to offer in place. *Sunshine* makes a lot of noise about its ownership of a minority ‘realistic’ tradition of space cinema from which the interstellar baroque of *Star Wars* and television space opera are excluded, and has paraded its consultant astrophysicist widely in the PR. But to anyone raised on sf of any hardness greater than tissue paper, this claim looks pretty wonky in a film about an astrophysically nonsensical mission whose climax violates even the insouciant model of solar physics to which the film has hitherto adhered.

As always, though, the Garland-Boyle team are strongest on atmosphere, pacing and suspense, and what *Sunshine* recalls more than anything is two guilty pleasures bedded deep in the sf imagination of Brits of a certain generation, so deep that they may not even be accessible to conscious awareness: the first-season *Thunderbirds* episode ‘Sun Probe’, and above all the claustrophobic, suspense-driven interplanetary novels of Hugh Walters, which were to young space-agers here what the Heinlein juveniles were for the rest of the world. Against the chirpy can-do enthusiasm of their American siblings, they offered a compellingly British vision of space adventure as characterised by tedium, isolation, and a struggle against existential despair. These are narratives whose central tension lies in the fact that in space nothing happens for months at a time, and it can’t even be taken for granted that the mission will reach any kind of destination at all. *Sunshine*’s own long, painful journey through post-production has eventually managed to come out with a reasonable emulation of a much more expensive film; and if the payload ultimately fails to detonate as intended, at least the mission manages to be worthy-but-doomed in a proudly British kind of way.



In contrast, *The Last Mimzy*, a curious in-house project from New Line directed by *LotR* producer Bob Shaye, is an object lesson in what can go wonderfully right and horribly wrong when Hollywood gets to work on the sf classics. ‘Mimsy Were the Borogoves’, by Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore under their flagship pseudonym of Lewis Padgett, is one of the most reprinted sf stories ever, from Groff Conklin’s pioneering *Treasury* through to the long demise of the sf anthology in the eighties. Originally published in *Astounding* in 1943, it was a classic Campbellian tale of technotranscendence in which two young children find a toybox from the far future whose contents trains them in a non-Euclidean physics impenetrable to the less flexible intelligence of their adult observers. At the climax they decipher *Jabberwocky* as the instructions dictated by Alice Liddell, recipient of an earlier box, on building an apparatus that gives them physical as well as conceptual access

to the places the adults can’t follow, and are never seen again. It’s a shame if the novelette’s less read now than in the age when the classics of magazine sf were kept alive by a vibrant industry of collection and recirculation, because if anything it carries more resonance in an age where the greater conceptual athleticism of young heads, which the story had to argue at length in heavy narratorial lecture dumps, is a commonplace of technological culture, and the kind of programmed educational play that was then only an extrapolation has spawned a whole industry of learning technology.

The film version’s strength, which is considerable, lies in the child leads and the relationship between them, eschewing as it does all the dismal clichés of sibling tension for a brother-sister relationship that is close, mutually supportive, and ultimately strengthened by their progressive alienation from the adult world. It’s one of the very few

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE



recent films you could take your kids to in the confidence that it won't reinforce the sinister Hollywood orthodoxy that antagonism is the natural state of siblinghood. The two young principals are well written and beautifully directed, with a starmaking performance from six-year-old Rhiannon Leigh Wryn (who toddled briefly in the prologue of *Hulk*), and their transformation into little Charly Gordons is managed with an exemplary balance of empathy and estrangement.

This only makes it the more maddening that every single other thing about the film is awful beyond imagining. The script has been manhandled by some famous fingers, including those of James V. Hart and more recently Bruce Joel Rubin, with the result that the tautness and coherence of the original plot has frayed apart to the point where nothing make any sense at all, including not just the sf elements but the motivation of every single one of the adult characters, who at times are reduced

to shouting aimlessly in the background. The point of the story, that children's minds are so flexible that just playing with the right toys could turn them into Slan, has been brushed aside in favour of an unexplained mechanism of actual neural growth, magically promoted by the cuddly Mimzy, a cybernetic replica of Alice's bunny. The dry narrative frame of an incomprehensible far future has given way to an insultingly nonsensical eco-plot about a polluted future that needs our ancient DNA to remake itself, and even this techno-flimflam is itself contaminated by some bizarre twaddling with Buddhism and palmistry. When, at the end, the rabbit hole in spacetime is successfully opened, it's Mimzy, not the kids, who make the trip – a dismal betrayal of the story's haunting message that our children are headed places we're already unable to imagine. But given the sheer ghastliness of the coda that lies on the other side, they show wisdom beyond their years.



David Lynch's *Inland Empire* is a fall down a very deep, dark rabbit hole indeed, plunging Laura Dern's heroine into a warren of slippery subterranean tunnels in time and reality till it becomes impossible to find a way back to the surface, or to be sure that any kind of surface ever existed. Things begin gently enough, with Dern's career-becalmed actress landing a role in a haunted movie: a remake of an unfinished Polish film whose leads came to mysterious and ghastly ends, and whose present incarnation as a hot-blooded southern romance begins to draw its heroine into dangerous Lynchian triangles both on and off the set. But as filming gets under way, the film-within-a-film starts to assert itself, first as its own reality and before long as a portal to still further and weirder identities and narratives. Soon we're in a familiar narrative Lynchscape of timeslips and loops, multiple selves, and strangers issuing mysterious instructions;

of troubled women and controlling, abusive men; of long dark flights of stairs and sinister domestic furniture. When, near the end of this three-hour spacewalk in narrative zero-g, we seem finally to emerge into a recognisable version of the place from which we started, it's only for the slippages to crowd in again till the question of which dreamed it becomes lost in a looking-glass maze. "I don't know what happened before or after," one of Dern's avatars confesses in the darkest of the competing narrative frames. "I don't know what happened first, and it's laying some sort of mindfuck on me."

Inland Empire is three hours of very pure, very high-grade Lynch, and the liberation of shooting crewlessly on handheld video has clearly excited and unhinged its maker in equal measure. But what just stops this being one of the great Lynch films, a triumphant trilogic culmination to *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, is the defiant resistance of its narrative fragments to any kind of assembly.

Never a big fan of plotting, Lynch has always liked to make his narratives from the bottom up, gathering moments and threading them together in fractured, offbalancing montages that withhold the bland reassurances of conventional coherence. (A particularly unsettling effect is to leave Dern out of the frame of scenes she's supposed to be witnessing from within.) But where his earlier films have dangled the possibility of a governing coherence just beyond the edge of vision, *Inland Empire* boldly abandons even that for a kind of narrative analogue to its point-and-shoot filming technique, in which the script has been allowed to take shape over the leisurely course of the shoot. The film began, appropriately enough, by following the lead of *Rabbits*, Lynch's website shorts about a trio of talking coneys trapped in a ghastly *Eraserhead*-toned sitcom, now reborn as the most memorable chamber in *Empire*'s narrative warren. Other material accreted, and Dern's fractured character became the thread weaving among them. But all this makes it difficult to feel the fragments as part of a system of meaning in the way that even the most hallucinatory of Lynchian features have always, and crucially, managed to suggest.

Plenty more lo-tech, hand-shot dream slippage is on view in Michel Gondry's **The Science of Sleep**, in which artist and inventor Gael Garcia Bernal pursues Charlotte Gainsbourg in and out of his dreams, which punctuate the narrative in a magnificently *Blue Peter* tissue-and-toilet-roll style of effects. The laziest thing to say about this film is unfortunately also the truest: that Gondry without Charlie Kaufman, who wrote both his earlier films, is a sadly diluted talent, for all his imaginative passion and lo-fi directorial invention. Thematically and stylistically, the continuity with *Eternal Sunshine* is strong: there's the same preoccupation with the interface between waking and dreaming, and the same enthusiastically amateurish approach to FX, disdaining digital wizardry for trick sets and mechanical in-camera effects. But without Kaufman's technical precision in the outer reaches of screenwriting, important things just don't ring true: Bernal's emotional autism and strange swings into relational Tourette's; the narrative shape of his dreams, which try hard to strike the difficult balance between arbitrariness and significance but don't really manage to convince as dreams. In a film so undisguisedly about the filmmaking personality, it's a bold move to make Bernal's character, initially a charming and magical bumbler, emerge gradually as self-absorbed, emotionally damaged, and ultimately pretty unlikable. But it's an awful lot to reach for in a first unassisted script, exciting though it is to see him try. Next on Gondry's slate after his Jack Black movie is a Daniel Clowes-scripted adaptation of Rudy Rucker's *Master of Space and Time*. Now that really does sound like a dream.

There's a surprising amount about the need for decent writers in Mark Steven Johnson's **Ghost Rider**, Marvel's most serious movie misfire since deciding that one *Punisher* movie was fewer than one too many. It's not so much that even the likable Johnson, who did a respectable fan-boy job on *Daredevil*, has the devil's own job in trying to service a stunt vehicle for the most infernally silly character in the mighty Marvel universe. Rather, it's that the unfortunate keyword 'rider', when drawled in the accents of hell, is indistinguishable from 'writer', resulting in a rich succession

of unplanned metafilmic negotiations between the factions of the plot. "Now, deal with my writer! Send me your precious writer! I will deal with him just like I will deal with you!" – and so on, and on, to the point where it starts to sound like coded transcripts of messages between writer-director Johnson and the various dark forces he serves. It's fairly clear this one would never have got off the blocks but for Nic Cage's perverse commitment to playing the character of Johnny Blaze, stunt biker turned devil's bounty hunter. "Sure wish things could have turned out different," he





grunts to his sweetheart at the end, with a look that knows best not to spell out, “and that I wasn’t a flaming skull by night on a bike like I’m trapped in a Megadeath sleeve”.

Johnson’s script cherry-picks the title’s messy back continuity with a nervous eye on potential picketers concerned about what Eva Mendes’ character calls “comparative exponential religiosity crap,” adopting the version in which the devil’s bounty hunter doesn’t actually work for the devil but for Mephistopheles: apparently some kind of line manager from hell, “cast out of heaven by (beat) St Michael himself”.

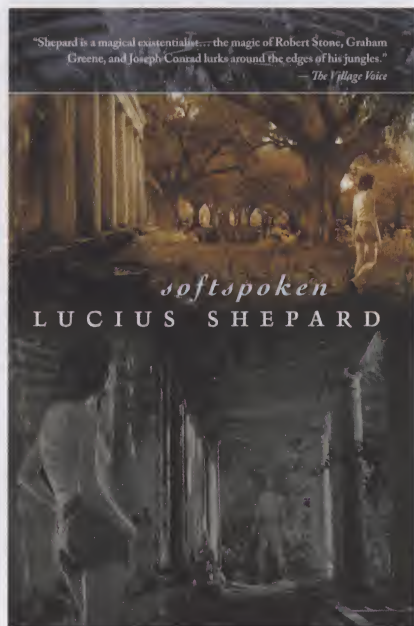
Sam Elliott’s caretaker of backstory does a professional if baffling line in extremely deep voiceover, but even he’s unable to make much sense of the plot, which concerns a lost contract for a townload of damned souls that will somehow enable the nethergoons to take over the earth; while the telltale reliance on father/son baggaging, on both sides of the infernal divide, is all too suggestive of an underlying desperation. It’s a valiant shot at its doomed material, but it’s hard not to feel that Johnson, like his hero, has been suckered into a contract to write for the devil.

Deeper still in vintage comics hell, **TMNT** is the latest attempt to reignite a franchise that never really went away, but has slipped so far down the ratings since the lunchbox years of the late eighties that it’s deemed necessary to start over with a more txtable brand label. Since live-action budgets are no longer within the Turtles’ grasp, this reboot is driven to the modest innovation of resurrecting the film arm of the franchise in 3D animation: a first for established comics characters, and a move that does restore some of the original graphic edge of the Eastman-Laird comics, with attractively stylised urban deco sets and boldly stylised versions of its human characters.

But the shell of the turtles’ world has hardened since 1993, and we’re never allowed to forget the stark economic fact that this is essentially now a toy franchise, in which every character has to be part of a numbered set of action figures, and the plot, which makes *Ghost Rider*’s look crystalline and pellucid, is entirely built around completing sets of Gundamesque figurines. First the Turtles themselves have to be put back together, Raphael having gone solo, Leonardo busy exporting his private brand of freedom to “Central America, Present Day,” and the others grown up and got jobs. All thus miss the voiceover expologue about how “once every three thousand years the stars will align and open up a portal to a dimension of unknown power,” to which end an immortal warlord is corralling a wishlist of thirteen collectible monsters (which apparently have been terrorising NYC for three millennia without anyone particularly noticing) with the aid of his four collectible red-eyed stone generals and Zhang Ziyi’s freelance ninja legion from what looks like a different script entirely. These plots proceed more or less independently of one another, the Turtles being more preoccupied with sibling tensions and rebonding than with getting on with the film: perhaps a clawmark of the scary brothers Weinstein. (“I hate to see brothers fight like this.” – “Unless it’s together!”) And though it’s nearly an hour in before the first “Cowabunga,” the script scatters hostage lines like throwing weapons: “This place used to be fun,” “Long have we been in hiding; perhaps too long,” and most wishfully “All right! Finally, some excitement!” The original film trilogy got more rather than less interesting as the returns diminished; but it’ll take more than this bomb down the sewers to detonate it back into a source of energy. **Nck Lowe**

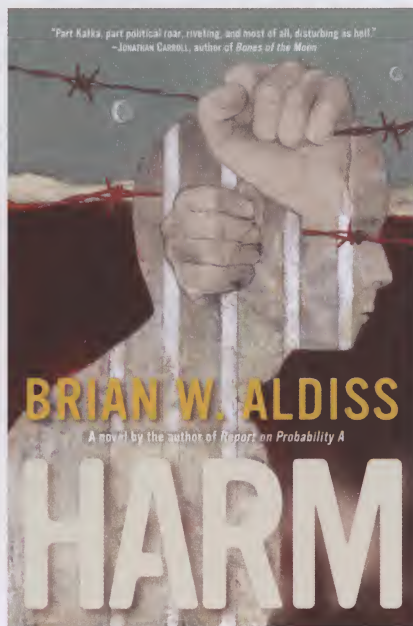
Softspoken

Lucius Shepard • Night Shade, 179pp, \$23.95 hb



HARM

Brian W. Aldiss • Ballantine, 223pp, \$21.95 hb



The propensity of story is to end well. Even the great tragedies of the Western tradition normally terminate with a couplet or two in which the ship of state is formally righted. (*King Lear* is intolerable because no one believes the couplet.) And even after a couple of centuries of horror, we still expect someone to light out like Eve from the Bad Place before the conflagration burns it down to Hell or what. The propensity is deep – it is almost certainly wired into the human brain to apprehend stories as escapes from prison, hence the number of bad horror novels which end in cod whimsy – and a novel like Lucius Shepard’s *Softspoken* clearly plays, with calm cunning craft, on our need to believe its protagonist will be able to hold herself together long enough to live. Brian W. Aldiss’s *HARM*, on the other hand, makes no bones that the world, as it appears on page one, will never stop being exactly what we feared.

Softspoken begins in the kind of foetid enclave we’ve come to recognise as one of Shepard’s central countries: a small town deeply sunk in the heart of the edge of the world (inland South Carolina this time round), and a Gothic Bad Place deeply sunk in the heart of the heart). As usual in horror tales whose focus is on the compulsions of venue, the protagonist of *Softspoken* has fatally loosened her ties with the consensual, urban world, and has become an exilic prisoner in the Bad Place: a central lesson of modern horror being that far from being free, or estranged, or footloose, the exile protagonists so often found in the genre simply have not yet had their eyes opened to their deadly

immurement in the real. The impression that the exilics of 2007 float free upon this time-scalded planet are no more than tangles of will-o’-the-wisp, thickenings of the entrails of illusion. Sanie, the extremely likeable protagonist of *Softspoken*, is precisely so entangled, even though the detail-work of her entrapment comes out of stock footage: her attempts to grapple free from her bad husband; the Bad Place family home he has dragged her into from their previous urban life; the stale molasses quasi-suburban Southern world she looks for recourse in; her own fecklessness and sexual frustration, neither of which Shepard describes as killing offences; a general sense that the glue is dry: that there

is nothing to keep her whole. Significantly, though she is an amateur writer of some skill, the stories she has written, and which are transcribed into the text, are all of them *unfinished*, and because they are unfinished she is unfinished (stories are questions of identity, and are highly dangerous if not answered): her not knit story cannot conceive an escape from prison.

(The device of the unfinished story as descriptive of the imprisonment of the teller is perhaps most savagely exploited in Gene Wolfe’s 1975 novel *Peace*, whose narrator protagonist, who is a liar and dead, will never escape the trap of his life because he cannot describe it, no matter how many unfinished tales he fills his “confession” with.)

Sanie has been married for a decade to Jackson Bullard, who returns with her to the family home near Edenburg to study law; in this decrudescent mansion she begins to hear a ghost voice which entreats her to be able to listen; Jackson’s dysfunctional siblings confirm the presence of hordes of ghosts in the house, because a “vortex” has entrapped them there. Not particularly alarmed, she perceives, however, after taking peyote, that the vortex, which is the hole at the bottom of the world, does not only make whirl like dead leaves the already dead, for some of the ghosts may not have yet perished. They all wear the decayed foolish suburban spayed Bullard face, vortex and Bullards are one, time tosses them eaten. Once almost Ivy League, she finds that Jackson has deliquesced into a Bullard face, and begins to enrol her into his unstoryable hell, and she falls through.

The crescendo of her entrapment in this engorging maw has been slow, subtle, almost casual. It is only in the final pages that one realizes that there has never been any other ending than what one is about to witness, that Sanie has been sliding eyes wide shut to a point where – eyes wide – it is too late. This is of course a central point of all great horror: that the callus of self cannot contain the truth of the world. After the terminal thing has happened to her, lying deep in it, Sanie has a flotsam thought:

She thinks if she could write it down, if she had a pen, she could write her way out of this corner and arrive at a proper ending.

But there is no proper ending after you have seen the world.

SCORES: THE HARM WORLD JOHN CLUTE

I spoke in a previous column (*Interzone* 201) of late Aldiss. Of the angular, jagged, impatient energy that old writers sometimes gain, so that their last books seem younger than the measured monuments of their middle years. Aldiss had not literally written his last novels with *Jocasta*: “*Wife and Mother*” (2005) or *Sanity and the Lady* (2005), nor (now 81) has he reached the ocean at last with **HARM**, for there is at least one more full-length book in the immediate offing; but **HARM** (the acronym stands for Hostile Activities Research Ministry) unleashes the kind of rage one prays to see in old writers uttering their last about a world which sucks.

We are in the very near future. Paul Fadhil Abbas Ali is a British Muslim. He has suffered all his life from a dissociative disorder (a mild form of what used to be known as schizophrenia), augmented by his quasi-exilic relationship to his native land: for, like all second generation citizens, he is twins within: half locked into his blood, half évolué. He is a writer, but significantly – because Wodehouse’s taken on England was essentially exilic after about 1913 – his only novel is a Wodehousian spoof on British manners. Unfortunately, one of his spoofish protagonists speaks of assassinating the Prime Minister:

“I see it now,” Celina said, laughing. “Bits of him spread all over Downing Street.”

“Yes – to be known thereafter as Downer Street...”

Moderately unfunny (as Aldiss clearly intends), but harmless.

This is all backstory. We actually begin in medias res. Paul is in a security prison somewhere. He is beaten, tortured, spat upon, deceived, for the rest of the novel, pretty well. We get used to it. We hardly expect him to survive the insane interrogations about his plan to assassinate the Prime Minister, about his disgusting liaison with a white woman (Doris, his wife), about his hatred of the country that let him in (he was born in Britain). It is all exaggerated – we do certainly wish to think – from the actual *normal* practice of the British and American anti-terrorist security forces, but of course everything Aldiss subjects Paul to has happened to somebody in the hands of these governments at some point or other. Or at the hands of “friendly” governments into whose hands prisoners charged with no offence have been “rendered” in order to be tortured – such a genius word for these people to select, with its clear reference to the slaughtering of pigs,

a word so decayed that one’s experience of linguistic decay in mouthing it is almost epiphanic. So his experiences are sf only in the sense that they all happen at once.

Aldiss’s prose is bald, brief, stripped for action. It is a prose for which nothing comes as a surprise, not even the obscene slaver of linguistic decay in the mouths of our governors. It is a prose that, like Sanie, we fall through into things. But Paul has a kind of involuntary recourse. Dissociate in his “ethnicity” and his art, he also dissociates literally – rather like “Kirk Allen” in “The Jet-Propelled Couch” from Robert Lindner’s *The Fifty-Minute Hour* (1955) – into another world, the desiccated colony planet Stygia (ie Milton’s Hell) where, as a man named Freemant, he undergoes a sequence of experiences that take off from Paul’s immurement. The central action of the Stygian sequences is a trek through desert and valley, killing the insect-based native fauna *ad libidum en route*, in search of one final aborigine who might have escaped genocide at the hands of a Christian general. At first the deadpan seemingly affectless but in truth enraged horror of all this reminded me of Barry Malzberg, Paul Park, Jonathan Lethem, all of whom have turned the triumphalisms of space opera upside down, in order to life on other planets (which is to say the life of most of us except hard sf writers) as essentially Third World. But in the end the previous tale whose stigmata seemed most to enrapture these passages of *HARM* was David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920), whose protagonist Maskull (like Freemant) is a pilgrim who destroys almost everything he touches his fatal-to-natives quest through the occluded Gnostic Hell of the planet called Arcturus for something like reality.

Meanwhile, back in the torture-occluded “reality” of his own detainee skin, Paul is very nearly terminated: like an insect under Maskull’s dismissing boot. As the book nears its final page, we find it almost impossible to watch. Outside the prison, too, the world (our own world) is unbearably sad, deeply cruel in defeat, profoundly stained with denial. None of the bought shits who lost the war of September 2001 are mentioned by name in *HARM*. But they are all in there, mispronouncing the world they have besmeared. The rest of us – the 95% of us who no longer own the lands of our birth – hope never to be Paul. **John Clute**

HARM will be published in the UK by Duckworth this August (232pp, £14.99 hb)

The Sam Gunn Omnibus

Ben Bova • Tor, 704pp, \$29.95 hb

As the title suggests, *The Sam Gunn Omnibus* is a fixup novel that collects all of Bova’s stories about the eponymous hero, written for and published in the US science fiction magazines of the late 1980s and early ’90s.

So, who is Sam Gunn? He’s the boom-bust entrepreneur incarnate, an embodiment of *laissez faire* capitalism in space exploration who names spaceships after free-market economists and sees a profit in every problem, large or small. He’s also a reincarnated Huck Finn in a space suit; a tireless braggart and womaniser; the natural enemy of rules, regulations and corporate methodology. If it wasn’t for his redeeming habit of helping out his friends *en route* to his next pile of riches, you’d have to hate him on principle – and most people already do.

And that’s as far as it goes for character development. Gunn is an avatar, a plot device through which Bova explores and exploits the solar system using scientifically plausible methods that governments and corporations have so far refused to use, for various reasons. As such, these tales of the first businesses, hotels and habitats in orbit should be hugely relevant in this era of nascent space tourism operations, inspiring grandiose dreams of a brighter bolder future for our species.

And they might still have been, if the stage wasn’t hogged by the overbearing and improbable Gunn.

The other characters are no better – a roster of crude geopolitical stereotypes and caricatures – and it is probably the attitudes implicit in these characterisations that most clearly date these stories as relics of a bygone era. The life of Sam Gunn reads like an *apologia* for greed and misogyny, and even readers sympathetic with Bova’s yearnings for the human race to escape the gravity well may find themselves tiring of the same successful-underdog plot continually reiterated against a different backdrop.

Perhaps I’ve just missed the point – although Bova’s introduction suggests that there is no point to miss. As pure escapist wish-fulfilment, the *Omnibus* succeeds, but the reader in search of true *sensawunda* may wish to search elsewhere. **Paul Raven**

Conqueror

Stephen Baxter • Gollancz, 375pp, £17.99 hb

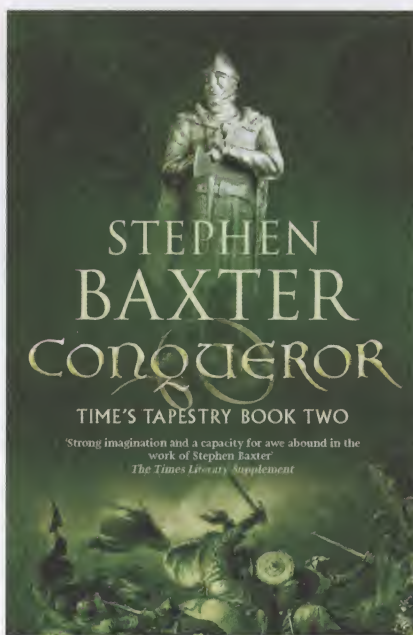
Stephen Baxter has been reinvigorating the tradition of future history as a grand theme in his own way over the last few years – with the Xeelee stories, among others – but he hasn't exactly neglected past history either. For example *Evolution* (2002) begins sixty five million years ago, and moves steadily forward to the present, passing it and ending millions of years in the future. *Coalescent* (2003) set one of its many interlocking narratives in the Britain of the early fifth century AD, as the power and presence of the Roman Empire was visibly ebbing away.

With *Emperor*, the first book of *Time's Tapestry*, Baxter returned to Roman Britain. And now *Conqueror* (*Time's Tapestry* book two) goes one step further, chronicling the slow development of England up to 1066, from the ascendancy of the German invaders to the downfall of their civilisation at the hands of William the Bastard.

In the beginning, the awesome debris of the Roman Empire is still littering the land and its people living in the shadow of ruined cities in a sort of post-holocaust world that has already happened. At the end, not much has apparently changed: there are still tremendous ruins and a mute history dominating the lives of people groping their way through their present and onwards.

But the future, that which has not yet happened, casts its bright shadow on those few who know about the Menologium of the Blessed Isolde. This is a prophecy given by the Weaver and carefully preserved down the generations in oral and written form. In *Conqueror*, the prophesy consists of prologue, epilogue, and nine stanzas, all reproduced in Anglo-Saxon and modern English. The predicted events are scheduled to occur with successive returns of what we know as Halley's Comet.

Conqueror begins with a prologue set in Westminster Abbey on one of the most significant days in English history – Christmas Day 1066. Then the story proper begins with a chance encounter in the ruins of Romano-British Londinium in 607. Under the glare of the "hairy star" two young men end up assisting in a search for the legend of Isolde. Travelling to Hadrian's Wall to see one of Isolde's descendants, they read a copy of the prophecy and



STEPHEN BAXTER: TIME'S TAPESTRY

With *Emperor*, the first book of *Time's Tapestry*, Baxter returned to Roman Britain. And now *Conqueror* (*Time's Tapestry* book two) goes one step further, chronicling the slow development of England up to 1066, from the ascendancy of the German invaders to the downfall of their civilisation at the hands of William the Bastard

find out about the Weaver, "who sits in his palace of the future and sees all – and schemes to establish the new Rome" (55). The prophecy must be fulfilled each time the comet returns, otherwise the bright future will not come to pass.

In a series of episodes, spaced-out across the decades and centuries, people who have become connected with the prophecy try to make sense of it and bring about the fulfilment of their particular piece. It's all illuminated by the returning comet as the cycles of invasion, assimilation, ascendancy and downfall are repeated, with all the brutal upheavals that England and its inhabitants constantly experience. Baxter writes an engrossing historical novel, fast-moving, often violent, and bringing before us a world as alien as any far future that he's ever written about. And true to form, Baxter never lets go of a fundamental insight, given to one of the characters at the beginning of the novel, which is also a source of wonder for us: "he sensed the past, as if the doors of a vast abandoned hall opened to him. It was thrilling, disturbing." (33)

The epilogue folds back round into the prologue, with an almost incidental

of that most tantalising science-fictional speculation: "What if...?" Indeed. We know what did happen. But as the prophecy survives to tantalise and perhaps influence events next time the comet returns, there are clearly going to be more intriguing speculations in store. There is often the breathless feeling that the mist may clear at almost any time to reveal a vast and half-suspected landscape.

In *Conqueror* the past most certainly is a foreign country, where things are done differently, but there are also points of continuity with what will (or has) come to pass. In particular, places and landscapes play their part, if only simply by being there, providing part of the woven backdrop against which the dance of time, the entry and departure of individuals and whole peoples, takes place. The characters and the land itself are embedded into the tapestry as it lengthens before our eyes and England itself – even its name and that of its various invaders and inhabitants – develops and gradually becomes more recognisable. And what of England? And which possible England? That is to be eagerly awaited, when the series finally comes to a triumphant conclusion.

Conqueror is very sfnal in that it gets the reader to ask the question "What if...?" Alternate or stillborn realities seem to be a theme that you can never quite keep way from, so what jonbar hinges are the most important in *Time's Tapestry*?

The basic conceit in *Time's Tapestry* is that we're working through historical epochs, each of which is subject to meddling from the then future, our near present. So the whole thing is full of jonbar hinges. I actually follow Jared Diamond in believing that most of history is probably pretty much determined by geography and climate change and other grand agencies – see Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*. But on the other hand there surely are great hinges of history where, say, the decisions of a single human, or the outcome of a single battle, really did change everything. And those are what I've focused on in *Tapestry*. *Emperor* is based

a sense that nothing much changes; the south-east of England has been vulnerable to invasions from Caesar through William and Napoleon to Hitler. Although much history is fixed by geography, you also get a sense of what can be lost. The Roman fort dwarfed William; he fenced off the bit that was enough for his use. I also like to map this sort of thing forward. In *Resplendent*, my *Destiny's Children* collection, you see humans living in the ruins of alien colony buildings, and lingering under the ruins of a cathedral millennia after they (but not we) have forgotten what it was for. History written in stone, still alive in the present.

There is a 'spiritual' or 'mystical' element in your books, similar to that in Arthur C. Clarke's novels. Messiahs come and go across the centuries, and the universe is awesome and gigantic. Is there a place for God, or is he an unnecessary hypothesis?

REVIEW & INTERVIEW BY JOHN HOWARD

"As to God, I suppose I'd call myself an agnostic; I suppose I follow Arthur C. Clarke in believing we ought humbly to wait to learn a lot more about the universe before we go pronouncing about ultimate causes. After all we've learned a hell of a lot, for instance about life in the universe from the space probes, just in my lifetime"

around the career of Constantine, who was elevated in Roman Britain, and established Christianity as the religion of empire. If he had died young... Similarly *Conqueror* climaxes at the Battle of Hastings. If things had come out the other way, if Harold had prevailed, everything subsequently might have been different. England would probably have been safe from invasion for a generation at least, and the sons of Harold would have built an Anglo-Danish kingdom quite different from Norman England – freer, probably, for a start.

There's a strong sense of place in *Conqueror*. What is special or inspirational for you in the places you write about?

I like the idea of places with multiple uses across the ages. Pevensey, for example, on the English south coast, features in several of the *Time's Tapestry* books. It was a sea-defence fort built by the Romans, and still extensive and sturdy enough for William the Conqueror to use as his landing site during the 1066 invasion. And it was back in use as recently as the 1940s; you can see pillboxes built into the Roman stonework. You get a sense of history just from that continuity of usage – as well as

Well, I was brought up as a Catholic. I sort of felt I grew out of it, but I think that background primed me for sf because Catholicism contains a causal narrative for the whole universe; I was ready in a sense for a book like Clarke's *The City and the Stars* which gave me another cosmic narrative. As to God, I suppose I'd call myself an agnostic; I suppose I follow Clarke in believing we ought humbly to wait to learn a lot more about the universe before we go pronouncing about ultimate causes. After all we've learned a hell of a lot, for instance about life in the universe from the space probes, just in my lifetime. But here we are adrift in an immense and ancient universe, and one subject to drastic change; surely no sentient species could fail to develop some sense of the numinous, whether it was rationalised in the worship of a 'god' or not. I would say that although I 'grew out' of Catholicism I'm not an angry denouncer like Dawkins. For most people the core of a 'religious' life has to do with a sense of self-worth and community and duty and so forth, and the deeper theological questions don't impinge that much. Of course Dawkins would say that's entirely illogical, but we're not a very logical species, are we?

Dalek I Loved You

Nick Griffiths • Gollancz, 264pp, £12.99 hb

My name is Paul and I am a *Doctor Who* fan. I'm also slightly annoyed.

An odd way to start, you may think but this isn't your normal kind of review. The item being critiqued is, unusually, a memoir – written by someone familiar only to the byline readers of the *Daily Mail* and *Radio Times*, who has somehow persuaded a major publishing house to let him share his life with the wider reading public.

That's not what annoys me.

The thread through the book is Nick Griffiths's long love affair with *Doctor Who*; from his first encounter with the show, aged four and a bit, right up to watching the new series with his own son. That's when he's not down in Cardiff interviewing the current cast and production team for *Radio Times*.

That's not what annoys me either.

OK, I admit that there are enough similarities between me and Griffiths in terms of background and profession (except he doesn't write for *Interzone*...bet he's gutted) that part of me felt I could've written the book – though I'd have avoided the rambling narrative detours across the years and the sub-Nick Hornby lists of favourite records, English Eccentrics, and things that embarrass the author.

But it's Griffiths's use of *Doctor Who* itself that most disappoints. Early on he describes the show as his own TARDIS, transporting him back to his childhood. The Doctor's adventures are just a nostalgia engine, albeit one he can now share with his own son. The reader gets only the most superficial glimpse of how the series fired his imagination and whether it influenced his own personality or choice of career; indeed, there's little impact on the show's bonding power with his son.

The contextualisation of *Doctor Who* as both a personal and cultural icon is not without promise; indeed, Toby Hadoke covered much the same ground with his *Moths Ate My Doctor Who Scarf* show at last year's Edinburgh Festival. But I can't help feeling that Hadoke did it much more seriously, and much more amusingly, than Griffiths is able to do here in *Dalek I Loved You*.

And that's what really annoys me. **Paul F. Cockburn**

Ursula K. Le Guin: A Critical Companion

Susan M. Bernardo & Graham J. Murphy • Greenwood Press, 198pp, \$65 hb

Ursula K. Le Guin: A Critical Companion is a volume in a Greenwood Press series, 'Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers'. In some ways that tells you everything you need to know. It's a textbook, aimed at bright American high-school students and freshman undergraduates. The series leans heavily on a formula in which individual texts are cut and diced according to various headings, left in neat piles, ready for the student to construct textual interpretations of their own. For each novel (all the Earthsea novels, a selection from Le Guin's Hainish sequence, *The Lathe of Heaven*) there is a lengthy plot analysis, with further sections on theme, character development, and in each case an alternative reading of the novel. The authors are familiar with current critical

definition. I assumed they would return to this when discussing the Earthsea novels, but instead they turned to a different set of theorists, while noting, with perhaps a faint hint of disapproval, that Le Guin's notion of fantasy "is broad, as it includes works some might call science fiction." The astute reader will immediately spot that something strange is happening and, with luck, follow up the discussion.

The sections on the history of SF and fantasy also fail to make any significant links with one another, as though the authors were afraid of genre contamination. There were also some peculiar omissions. How one can describe Le Guin as being influenced by anthropology and then fail to include a substantial analysis of *Always Coming Home* I don't know, and I looked

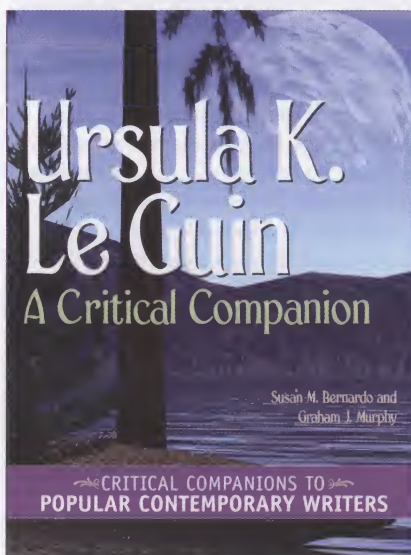
For each novel there is a lengthy plot analysis, with further sections on theme, character development, and in each case an alternative reading of the novel. The authors are familiar with current critical writing on SF and fantasy, which they quote confidently. For those unfamiliar with Le Guin's work, it is an effective introduction

writing on SF and fantasy, which they quote confidently. For those unfamiliar with Le Guin's work, it is an effective introduction.

Whether through choice or publishing stricture, the authors have chosen to categorise Le Guin's novels as either SF or fantasy, and to discuss the two sets of books almost entirely independently of one another, with only a little feeble cross-referencing of themes. I can see pedagogic arguments for such an approach, though its failure to recognise the holistic nature of Le Guin's oeuvre robs the book of a good deal of its critical integrity; on the other hand, thanks to this, and some inconsistency in the authors' arguments within the two sections, this critical companion comes complete with an implicit alternative reading.

The introductions to the two groups of novels suggests that the authors are not as secure in their appreciation of genre as might seem at first sight. Introducing the section on science fiction, for example, they draw heavily on Samuel R. Delany's essay, 'About Five Thousand Seven Hundred and Fifty Words' (Le Guin herself drew on Delany's work when co-editing *The Norton Anthology of Science Fiction*), which talks about the relationship of different kinds of writing to reality. Delany discusses fantasy in this essay, and the authors here note his

in vain for a significant discussion of 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas'. Perhaps the transcript of their interview with Le Guin best sums up the problems with this book; its authors grapple with their need to render everything neat and tidy while the author and her works resolutely refuse to comply, making everything complicated again. I like to think of future students taking their cue from Le Guin. **Maureen Kincaid Speller**



Cold Skin

Albert Sánchez Piñol • Canongate, 233pp, £6.99 pb

Cold Skin is resolutely not marketed as a genre novel, but there are subtle signs of its being at a tangent to the mainstream. The cover illustration contains one clue, a shadow on the sun resembling the pupil of an inhuman eye; the novel's eulogists (including David Mitchell and Yann Martel) might be another.

The unnamed narrator arrives on an Antarctic island to take up the post of weather observer for one year; but his predecessor appears to have vanished, and the only other man on the island is Gruner, the keeper of the neighbouring lighthouse, who seems highly unstable. Worse, on his first night there, the narrator's house is assailed by creatures out of the sea, and out of genre fiction: humanoid amphibians, physically reminiscent of those from Lovecraft's 'The

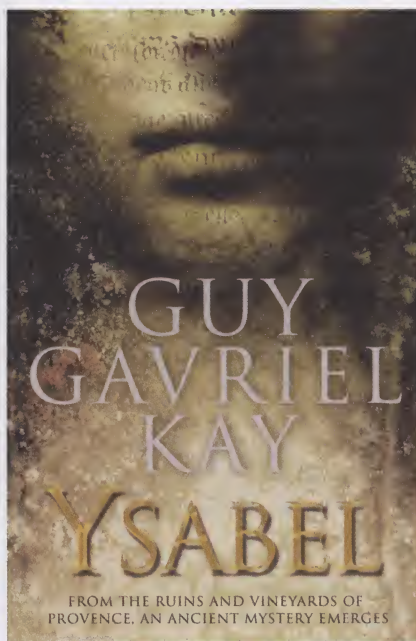
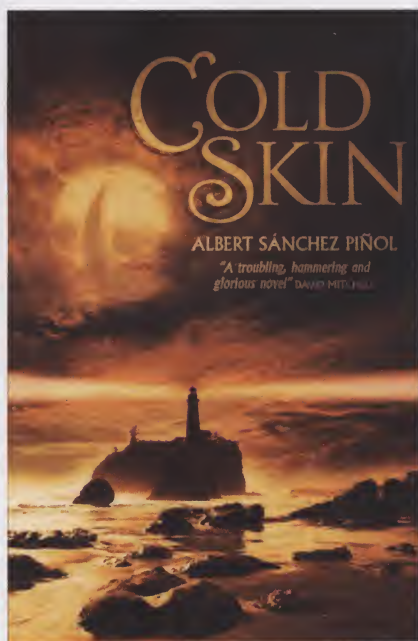
The author aspires to more than a nightmarish yarn: this is a parable about human nature, our innate capacity for prejudice and violence

Shadows Over Innsmouth', but in their overt, apparently mindless aggression more akin to the swine creatures from Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland*.

The subsequent nightly siege, and an uneasy alliance with Gruner, are well conveyed, in simple, elegant prose, well served by the English translation (the book was first published in Catalan in 2002). Clearly, though, the author aspires to more than a nightmarish yarn: this is a parable about human nature, our innate capacity for prejudice and violence, and our sometimes wilful inability to understand anything unfamiliar, including each other. This becomes apparent as the narrator forms an attachment to one of the creatures, a female kept by Gruner as a slave. The bond is first – unnervingly – sexual, then emotional and intellectual. Gradually, the narrator comes to believe that he has more in common with the creatures than with Gruner.

Not everything in the book works equally well. The ending, perhaps meant to be ambiguous, is merely opaque; and one wonders how well readers expecting an atmospheric mainstream novel will take to the overtly genre elements. Nevertheless, *Cold Skin* is interesting and unusual enough to be worth seeking out.

Alexander Glass



Ysabel

Guy Gavriel Kay • Simon & Schuster, 421pp, £18.99 hb

When fifteen-year-old Ned arrives in Provence as part of his famous father's entourage, he isn't moved by the beauty or history of his surroundings. He's too busy wishing that his father's attractive assistant, Melanie, would stop trying to organise his life. On the cusp of adulthood, he hates being treated like a child, but soon he's thrown into a nightmare of repeating history and myth in which he's forced to become an adult much too quickly.

Thousands of years ago, a love triangle formed around one woman, Ysabel. That triangle led not just to one isolated war but to numerous wars, repeated over and over again throughout history as different groups fought for the same land, directed by the same two immortal men, who return over and over again as Ysabel is

Ysabel is full of gorgeously realised magic as ancient myths come to life in the modern streets of Provence. But it is primarily a coming-of-age story

And Your Point Is? Scorn and Meaning in Jeff Lint's Fiction

Steve Aylett • Raw Dog Screaming Press, 107pp, \$10.95 pb

In *Lint*, Steve Aylett has written the long-overdue biography of one of science fiction's most enigmatic and wayward authors. Jeff Lint left an indelible impression (often literally) on everyone who encountered him. In furtherance of this inestimable service, Steve Aylett has now edited a collection of critical essays and reviews of Lint's shorter fiction, gathered from sources including *Interzone*, *The Idler*, *The Journal of Vortical Literature*, *fantasticmetropolis.com* and Lint fanzine *Too Pleased to Apologize Zine*.

And Your Point Is? Scorn and Meaning in Jeff Lint's Fiction takes its title from Lint's first published story (submitted under the name Isaac Asimov), in which an unperturbed tramp collects the rocks he is pelted with to build himself a fine house. As a metaphor for Lint's own ability for "effortless incitement," it couldn't be bettered.

Lint's protagonists typically intersect the hypocrisy of the world around them at right angles in a series of spastic motions and utterances. Aylett describes this as a form of "surreal exultation," while Welsome, in 'Review of 'I Am a Centrifuge'', calls it "irreverent to the point of parallel-dimensionality."

Equally often, the Lintian hero is an unshakeable innocent like Lenny in 'Broadway Crematoria', entrapped

in bondage and servitude (the maid's outfit may allude to Lint's self-enforced transvestism when delivering manuscripts to publishers) before finding escape and often explosive payback (as when nine year old Barry Mena returns to camp with a small neutron bomb in 'Snail Camp').

On first evidence, 'Sadly Disappointed' might be thought an exception to this pattern, but this is revealed in the editor's footnote to George Cane's review to be a fake, written by Alan Rouch, littering an undistinguished story with typical Lint coinages like 'trun' and 'lemphy'.

As well as fiction, both Aylett and Dennis Ofstein discuss Lint's hilarious and dangerous forays into theatre. Lint's pursuit of his philosophy of *carnagio* ("the theatre of collapse long resisted") included such epics as 27 *Workshy Slobs* and the notorious *The Riding on Luggage Show*, which concludes with barrels of Mexican jumping spiders emptied into the audience, who find the exits playfully locked.

I'm afraid I couldn't make much of Michael H. Hersh's 'Inconvenience From Outer Space' apart from an apparent obsession with "tentacled beauties." Nevertheless, *And Your Point Is?* stands as an indispensable addition for any serious fan or scholar of Jeff Lint's fiction. **Steve Jeffrey**

reincarnated. Each time, she returns by possessing the body of a mortal woman. This time, she takes Melanie. To get Melanie back, Ned will have to absorb the brutal history of Provence in time to solve Ysabel's riddle before either of her ageless lovers can find her in her new body.

Ysabel is full of gorgeously realised magic as ancient myths come to life in the modern streets of Provence. But it is primarily a coming-of-age story, and one that will resonate with every reader's memories of teenagehood. At fifteen, Ned is attracted to Melanie at the same time that he is intimidated by her adult confidence and sexuality; he's also attracted to a girl of his own age, Kate, but uncertain of how to progress with her. Worse yet, he is surrounded by the vivid proof of just how dangerous love and sex can be, as his family is swept into the destructive wake of Ysabel's endless romance.

Kay does a beautiful job of representing the limbo state of not-quite-adulthood, and the shift to contemporary fantasy after his historical novels leads to a clarified writing style that feels fresh and light. *Ysabel* is a pure pleasure to read for fans of history, mythology or pure high-spirited adventure. It works on all levels. **Stephanie Burgis**

So Far, So Near

Mat Coward • Elastic Press, 212pp, £5.99 pb

Here's a name that should need no introduction because nine of the seventeen stories in this collection were published in *Interzone* and *The Third Alternative*. However, laid out like this, they almost seem to create something new from their component parts. It reads like a fractured novel, one where the trajectories of the narrators and the author often intersect to capture a powerful concept.

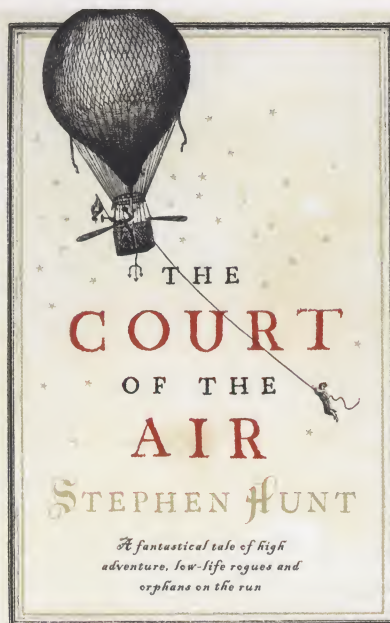
The opening story is 'Time Spent in Reconnaissance', which typically takes a well-worn theme and works something fresh from it. In this case it concerns a Roswell survivor who has been re-settled (abandoned, almost) in present-day Britain. A layered and witty story, it is also the only one to be told in the third person.

Everything thereafter is written in the first person in Coward's cohesive and direct style. This might throw the reader a bit when 'We All Saw It' turns up, and one has to remind oneself occasionally that the narrator is a woman. There's a group flying saucer sighting in this one, and the gist of the story is, what do you do afterwards for the rest of your life? Coward explores several possibilities. The multiple potentials addressed by this theme make it one of the most important stories here.

The protagonist in 'Now That I Know its Name' sounds like the alien in the opening story (but isn't). This is the story about a cat getting inside the television set and eating all the little people, but that is merely the hook to pull one towards a look at our society from the outside.

Not all of the characters are sympathetic, but there is an essential humanity in most of the stories. Occasionally Coward's socialist ideology takes over the stories, but this is no bad thing. One of the few occasions where he trips up the reader is in 'Remote Viewing'. The narrator is driving a CIA agent around seventies' Britain. In a disingenuous piece of authorial hindsight, the agent states that Russia will lose the cold war to the USA because having the Second World War fought over its territory has economically disadvantaged it. The differing pre-war economic policies of Stalin and Roosevelt might also have had a long-term effect, methinks. However, as a coming-of-age story, it's warmly wonderful.

Most of the rest of the stories bring up



uncomfortable ideas, but in those cases that's because you're sure that Coward is right. 'By Hand or By Brain' raises the issue of workers' rights in call centres with an unsettling horror attack. Coward *cares*. He also *thinks*, as 'The Second Question' shows with its bold high-wire answer to the time-travel paradox. The question being, where are all the other travellers?

Not every story here can be said to work, but the hit-rate is high. There are also concise story notes for anyone who's looking for more in the way of his writer's guide, *Success... And How To Avoid It*. This'll make an excellent companion to it in a lovely, ironic way. **Jim Steel**

The Court of the Air

Stephen Hunt • Voyager, 582pp, £12.99 hb

At first glance, *The Court of the Air* seems to offer the same fare as Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. The action begins in the Victorian style Kingdom of Jackals. An assassin arrives at the brothel, to which Molly Templar has been apprenticed, and sets about skewering everyone there. Molly flees back to the poorhouse where she grew up, to find the place ransacked and her fellow orphans slaughtered. It dawns on her that she may be the reason for the attacks.

Meanwhile, Oliver Brooks is framed for the murder of his guardian and forced to go on the run. As a child, Oliver was lost in the feymist, a curtain of otherworldly fog that alters all those who come into contact with it, endowing some with magical abilities while mutating others. Oliver's powers have yet to manifest themselves, but the voice that haunts Oliver's dreams hints of great things to come.

The Court of the Air is not just another Victorian fantasy romp, however. With Molly going underground to the revolutionary hotbed of Grimhope and Oliver visiting the kingdom of the magnificent steammen, it quickly becomes apparent that we are part of a much broader and richer world. It is a post-steampunk world of lost civilisations, feymist augmented warriors, megalomaniacal revolutionaries, political intrigue and godlike entities caught in an epic power struggle.

But Hunt packs in so much world-building detail that it often disrupts the flow of the story, especially in the early chapters. This superfluous exposition means it's difficult to become immersed in the plot and damages the credibility of the narrative voice.

There is also little to identify with in the characters of Molly and Oliver. After almost six hundred pages, all we know is that they're plucky and will fight back if pushed hard enough.

The Court of the Air is brimming with brilliant ideas (enough for a trilogy and a movie franchise) but ultimately it fails to deliver because it doesn't engage the reader on an emotional level. In trying to impress us with its grandiose setting, it forgets we still need a human connection.

Peter Loftus

STORIES BY PAUL MELOY

Islington Crocodiles

"I cannot define for you what God is," Jung wrote to me just before he died. "I can only say that my work has proved empirically that the pattern of God exists in every man, and that this pattern has at its disposal the greatest of all his energies for transformation and transfiguration of his natural being. Not only the meaning of his life but his renewal and his institutions depend on his conscious relationship with this pattern in his collective unconscious."

Jung and the Story of Oxy-Tone
Laurens van der Post



COMING SOON FROM THE PUBLISHERS OF INTERZONE

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Conceit

Raiders

Don't Touch the
Blackouts

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Earth for Snow

Running Away to
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Black Static

Dying in the Arms
of Jean Harlow

The Vague

Islington Crocodiles

An Ocean by
Handfuls

**'Crisp and inventive, fresh and distinctive.
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